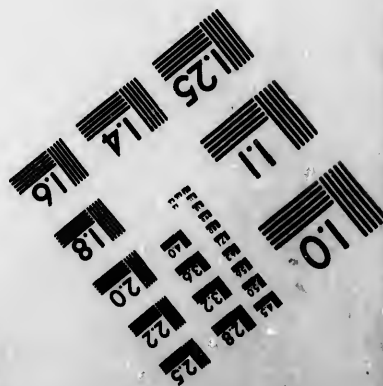
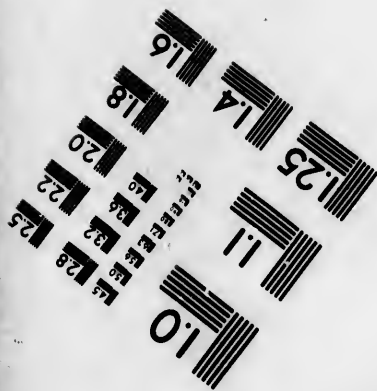
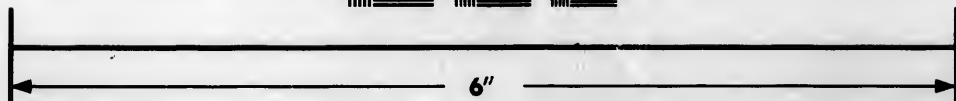
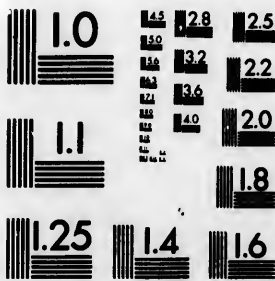


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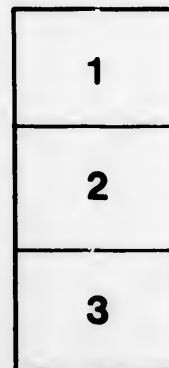
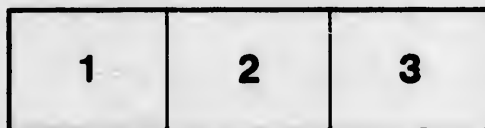
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JAMES HEPBURN,

Free Church Minister.

BY

SOPHIE F. F. VEITCH,

AUTHOR OF

"ANGUS GRAEME, GAMEKEEPER," ETC.

*The essence of sin is selfishness: the essence of selfishness is
individualism.*

TORONTO:

WILLIAMSON & CO., PUBLISHERS.

1888.

PR 5703 : V4 J3

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JAMES HEPBURN.

CHAPTER I.

THE MINISTER.

A CROSS a wide stretch of dreary level moor the Free Church minister of Dunross was wending his way towards home, at a rapid pace, one cheerless, foggy afternoon, late in the autumn. There were certainly no temptations to linger by the way. On a bright August or September afternoon, when the purple heather bloom was glowing under the rays of an unclouded sun, and picturesque ranges of hills were visible in the distance, the scene was not devoid of all beauty; but when, as at the moment, a dull brown expanse, broken only by occasional patches of coarse grass, or scattered boulders of stone, faded at a few hundred yards distance into grey mist, and a raw, cold wind was driving frequent scuds of light rain across the country, the spot was not one where any human being of ordinarily healthy turn of mind would have felt disposed to linger. The minister certainly did not linger. It would have sorely taxed any one, save a very practised walker, to keep pace with him for a couple of miles; and his long strides soon brought him to where the mere track he had been following gradually defined itself into a road. There, ascending a slight rise, he reached the head of a gradually widening glen, along the sides of which straggled the village of Dunross, in all the cold, stern solidity which is the leading character-

istic of a Scottish village. Dunross presented no salient feature to the eye, beyond the Free Church, seeming to assert itself a trifle ostentatiously on the summit of one knoll, with its manse on the top of another knoll close at hand.

As he reached this point on his homeward way the minister heaved a deep sigh, as in truth he had often done before, at that particular spot. Measured by his estimate of things, the lines had not fallen to him in pleasant places; yet he had his own private reasons for cherishing a secret conviction that no pleasanter ones were in store for him; he should probably live and die Free Church minister of Dunross.

The existence, in such a mere hamlet as Dunross, of a Free Church and manse was due to an outburst of Disruption enthusiasm on the part of a lay supporter of the movement who owned some land in the village. Not even that sparsely populated district, he determined, should be without its witness for the truth; so he built both church and manse at his own expense, besides contributing large sums to the Sustentation Fund; and had thus ensured at least the one result, that one minister of the community had marvellously little wherewith to occupy his time.

Of these few sheep in the wilderness James Hepburn had been the spiritual shepherd for twelve years; and though these years had not been wasted, he was very tired of his seclusion. Not that he for a moment held that individual souls increased in value in proportion as the number domiciled in a given space increased; but there was so terribly little to do. Had every man, woman, and child of his flock been seized simultaneously with mortal illness, he could have paid personal visits almost daily to each sufferer without overtaxing the powers of an active man. Yet here he

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believed himself to be doomed to end his days, so it was little wonder he often sighed at that particular point, from whence he had a bird's eye view of nearly the whole limited range of possible activity accorded to him.

James Hepburn's early life and training had been coloured by somewhat peculiar circumstances. He had grown up in the shadow of a great disaster. His father, a successful tradesman in a Scottish country town, had, when nearly fifty years of age, wooed and won a bright, handsome young wife, the daughter of a respectable farmer in the neighbourhood. He had been very frank in his admissions, telling her his early life had been a very dissipated one, and that almost in boyhood he had married a woman of abandoned character, from whom he had soon separated, and who had long been dead. With all the romance of youth, the girl only rejoiced the more at the prospect of being able to brighten a life thus early clouded by its own follies. They were married, and for a while the young wife was ready to throw down the gauntlet to any one who affirmed that perfect happiness was unattainable in this world. Her husband was kindness itself, manifesting towards her what she learned, in the light of subsequent events, to regard as a sort of remorseful tenderness. About six months after the birth of her son, the blow fell. The former wife was not dead. She soon gave abundant evidence of being quite alive, and very ready for mischief. There was a long, sad interview between the wretched pair, the result of which, to the unhappy young mother, was only the poor consolation of ascertaining that she had not been deliberately sacrificed by the man she had trusted. He had but regarded everything through the distorting medium of habitual selfishness. Good reason for believing his wife to be dead had been easily moulded into proof sufficient to justify his

marrying again without venturing on any inquiries, the result of which he could not control. Chance of discovery was too remote to be allowed to stand in the way of self-gratification. She saw the truth clearly, in spite of specious excuses and much ingenious special pleading; and perhaps her cruellest pang lay in the consciousness that she must heartily despise the man she had dearly loved.

She was, however, too self-controlled for extravagances. She scornfully rejected, for herself, the settlement he wished to make upon her; but agreed that it would be right he should maintain and educate the child, and see him when he chose to do so. He spared no pains on the boy's behalf, and when, about ten years later, he died, he provided handsomely for him by will.

In the colouring given to his mother's whole tone of sentiment by this cruel disaster had lain its most important result for James Hepburn. From his earliest infancy he learned to regard unswerving honesty and truthfulness and absolute unselfishness, as the noblest characteristics a man could possess, and to regard with unbounded contempt those social laws which attach a stigma where no stigma is merited. This last sentiment naturally, as he grew older, took in him the definite form of a distinct tinge of hostility towards "society," on his mother's account. He troubled himself very little about his own relations thereto; but that his cruelly-wronged mother should be held to be to some extent under a cloud, and that purse-proud dames, not always too careful to keep on the right side of the narrow line between levity and indecorum, should consider themselves entitled to treat her with a certain patronizing condescension of manner, chafed him sometimes almost beyond endurance. Even now, when she had been dead for some years, the memory of it all was very bitter to him.

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James Hepburn, sighing as his monotonous Arcadia loomed out upon him from the mist, was a tall, muscular, but somewhat loosely-built man, of about thirty-seven years of age. His massive forehead, features a trifle rugged, and thick bushy eye-brows, would have imparted some harshness to his expression, but for his kindly, honest grey eyes, which invited trusting confidence, even while seeming to pierce through and through the object on which they fixed an attentive gaze. Too energetic for inaction, and aided by his possession of private means, he had turned his solitude to good account; had accumulated, and made good use of a valuable library, and was a deep student and accomplished linguist. Whether he was a strictly orthodox Free Church minister, at least as the character defined itself in the minds of the early promoters of the Disruption, is quite another question. There were certainly books in his library, and books which bore marks of much handling, that were not redolent of Calvinistic theology. Moreover, it had once chanced that a profane outsider, who happened to be on a visit at the nearest country house, had heard some remarks made upon James Hepburn, which induced him, one fine breezy autumn morning, to walk across the moors to Dunross, in order to hear him preach; and that ungodly person subsequently stoutly maintained that the sermon contained quotations from the Koran. The faithful, however, proved themselves equal to the occasion, and brought the devices of the wicked to nought, by retorting that everyone knew, or ought to know, that the Koran was largely drawn from Scripture; and that he who betrayed he only recognized Holy Writ in a Mohammedan garb, merely published his own shame.

The minister was on the present occasion aroused from his despondent mood by an incident—a very trifling one

certainly in itself, but suggestive of possible sequences. Outside the manse door his house keeper was standing looking in the direction from which he was approaching, and the moment he appeared she beckoned to him to hasten his steps. What could be the matter? His thoughts flew off, somewhat ruefully, to one or two members of his congregation who were seriously ill, and lived a long way off; for the raw foggy evening did not render the prospect of another long walk inviting. Hastily crossing the head of the glen, and ascending the slight eminence on which the manse stood, he reached the gate just as the woman came forward and opened it.

"What's the matter now, Joan? he asked.

"There's twa gentlemen speerin' for ye, sir, an' desperate anxious to see ye. They say they canna wait vera lang."

"Who are they?"

"I dinna ken them. They say they're frae Mossgiel!"

"From Mossgiel! You didn't show them into my study, did you?" he added, a little hastily. Perhaps he only thought that it was very untidy, with very few unencumbered chairs to sit upon, but he may also have remembered that a volume of Spinoza, copiously annotated, was lying open on the desk.

"Na, na, sir. Wad ye hae me to lippen strangers in amang-a' yer books and papers? They're just in the other room."

This brief colloquy had taken place outside the manse. Within its tiny precincts every word would have been audible to the two visitors, into whose presence a very few steps soon brought the minister, and in whom he recognised as he expected to do, two leading members of the Free Church community in Mossgiel.

Mossgiel was a thriving town, of somewhat hybrid com-

position, situated about twenty miles distant from Dunross. The previous year the Free Church minister there had exchanged duty with Mr. Hepburn, for the sake of lighter work for a time, after a severe illness; and the minister had little doubt that some proposition of a like nature was the cause of the present visit.

"Ye maun excuse our comin' to business at once, sir," said the elder of the two visitors, as he returned the minister's greeting. "We're pressed for time. I was sair feared we wadna be able to wait until ye cam' in. Ye'll guess our errand, I'm thinking?"

"Another temporary change with Mr. Forsyth, I suppose."

"Na, Na. That's no it. Have ye no heard the news?"

"I have heard nothing."

"Mr. Forsyth's gane for gude. His health didna improve as it should do, sae he just gave up, and got some wark abroad, to try if a milder climate widna suit him better; sae we've to find anither minister. We've come the day, Mr. Hepburn, at the request of the committee, to invite you to come forward as a candidate."

A slight flush passed across James Hepburn's face, but he replied frankly, without a moment's hesitation—

"I am very sensible of the compliment the committee pay me, and should only be too glad to make the exchange. A place with such a much larger amount of work would be far more to my liking."

"Then we are to settle with ye what Sabbath ye'll come and preach"—and he produced a note-book. "There are only twa Sabbaths engaged yet."

"Oh, but that is quite another question," said Mr. Hepburn. "Why should I preach?"

"Why should ye not?"

"Because it is barely a year since I preached for nine consecutive Sundays. What more can the congregation need?"

"They wad na like ye no to tak' yer regular turn. Ye see they were no listenin' to ye then wi' ony thocht o' yer bein' their regular minister."

"Then I must frankly tell you I will not take a regular turn."

"What! not preach as a candidate?"

"Certainly not. It is a thing I long since resolved I would never do."

"But what is yer objection?"

"The objection that I have to place myself in what I hold to be a false, almost ridiculous position. Ask me to preach before a selected body of competent judges, and I am quite ready; but exhibit myself in a pulpit, before a mixed congregation, for every member of the same to have a fling at, I will not. It is bad enough to know how often one may owe one's election to dirty, underhand work; but that is a thing one has no power to prevent. If any congregation chooses to make inquiries, and then to elect me—good; if not, I will stay where I am."

His hearer looked at his watch. With genuine Scottish relish he scented an impending semi-theological argument, and rejoiced to perceive he had still a brief time in which to discuss the monstrous position taken up by the minister. But his hitherto silent companion, a retired lawyer, a less important church member, but more cultivated man, suddenly struck in.

"If one may venture to ask, Mr. Hepburn, is it not rather extraordinary that you, holding such opinions, should have voluntarily become a minister of our Church?"

"A very fair question, Mr. Laing. But when I took that

step I was some thirteen years younger than I am now, and I greatly doubt whether I had many opinions on any subject. My determination is the result of subsequent observation and reflection."

"Perhaps of some not altogether pleasant reminiscences?"

"Not at all. I never did the thing. I came here almost at a moment's notice, to take the place of the minister, who had been severely injured in a carriage accident. The result was for a long time uncertain, but ultimately he died, and the congregation unanimously elected me his successor."

"Weel, Mr. Hepburn," put in the first speaker, "I must say your resolve seems to me a maist extaordinar' one; an' I canna vera well think how the committee will tak' it."

"My experience on such points would lead me to expect the committee will indignantly refuse all consideration to so heretical a candidate, Mr. Rutherford. I have always believed my determination would bind me fast to Dunross for life."

"Are we to consider that decision as quite irrevocable?" asked Mr. Laing.

"Quite. I fully appreciate the compliment paid to me in the request that I would come forward as a candidate; and if a majority choose to vote for me, I shall hail the chance of a change with the greatest pleasure; but preach 'on approval' I will not."

But Mr. Rutherford, with ten minutes to spare, was not inclined to allow the question to be thus summarily dismissed. Even if Mr. Hepburn were not to be moved from his position, the question might still be argued out as a hypothetical one.

"Ye've greatly amazed me, Mr. Hepburn," he said. "I never heard of sic an objection bein' raised before on the

part o' any Free Church minister. Why—how would ye have a congregation choose a minister if he winna preach ?”

“My good friend, your question, if you will excuse my saying so, just nibbles at the edges of a very broad one. Were I the entire governing body of the Free Church rolled into one, I might find myself compelled to take the whole question into consideration. But I think I am naturally of rather a practical turn of mind ; so as I am only an insignificant unit in the Free Church community, I don't see the use of wasting my time in considering a question my opinion respecting which is of very little consequence to any one save myself. The time when any lack of ministers willing to preach on approval shall be a cause of embarrassment to congregations, is a very long way off. My idiosyncrasy, if you like to call it so, merely puts me out of the running.”

“That may be, sir ; but I wad greatly like to hear ye defend yer position. It seems to me that ye strike at a vital principle o' our Church.”

“If you mean to argue out that point with Mr. Hepburn,” interposed Mr. Laing, “you must excuse me from waiting to hear the discussion. It's a good five miles walk to the railway station, and it only wants just an hour and a half to the last train to-night. I am not inclined to walk the twenty miles back to Mossgiel.”

“Nonsense ; you are not going to walk back to the station,” exclaimed Mr. Hepburn, starting up with the air of a man glad to escape from the discussion. “My pony will take you easily in forty minutes, and you must have some refreshment before you start. I'll go and give directions.”

Thus he staved off a discussion for which he had no inclination ; the duties of host being clearly incompatible with defending a logical position. Mr. Rutherford was a

worthy and excellent tradesman, but not just the man whose opinions on ecclesiastical questions would be calculated to throw new lights on vexed questions. The minister drove his guests to the station himself, and as they wished him good-bye, Mr. Rutherford said—

“Of course, sir, we’ll put ye in nomination; but I’m bound to say I canna think ye’ve muckle chance. I doubt the congregation ’ll look on yer refusal to preach as a sort o’ a slight.”

Mr. Laing, however, from behind his companion bestowed a very meaning, but not very intelligible look upon the minister, and, somewhat puzzled thereby, Mr. Hepburn drove away.

Had he done well or ill? He was not a man to set up personal sentiments as principles to be defended conscientiously at the risk of, or in ardent anticipation of martyrdom; and any idea that his resolution on this point gave him the faintest moral superiority over a man who thought and acted differently would never have crossed his mind; while in the present case, the inducement to yield the point was strong enough to cause him a moment’s hesitation whether he should write and retract his determination. But no! Stronger still was the feeling that in so doing he should degrade himself to some extent in his own eyes by voluntarily placing himself in what he held to be a humiliating position. Then, from a merely abstract, he passed to a concrete consideration of the case. He thought of Mr. Cruikshanks, a leading tradesman in Mossgiel, a wealthy man, and important member of the Free Church; a rigid Calvinist, a stern Sabbatarian, a vehement opposer of human hymns and new-fangled positions; and withal, a man well known to sail as near the wind in a trade transaction, if his own interests required it, as was consistent with

his personal safety. He thought of Mrs. Haigg, the austere widow, compared with whose tongue, as a firebrand, Samson's foxes were a trifle. He thought of Miss Muir, whose sentiments towards himself during his brief tenure of office had been manifested in ways indicative of some little mental confusion between the man and the minister. Then he pictured to himself all these people, and a good many others beside, sitting in judgment on his ministerial qualifications, and he shook his head with a gesture of angry impatience. Was there a man living, he speculated, who could stand up to preach "on approval" in any congregation save one in which all the members were totally unknown to him personally?

Steadily resolving to think no more of the bait which had been thus temptingly dangled before his eyes, he applied himself again to hard study, and such active work as his limited opportunities afforded to him; and had very nearly succeeded in forgetting all about this temporary disturbance of the placid currents of his life when he received one morning a letter, the perusal of which caused him to fall back in his chair and almost gasp for breath. He had been elected on the previous day by a considerable majority to fill the vacant place of Free Church minister in Mossiel.

CHAPTER II.

SOCIETY IN MOSSGIEL.

THIS certainly somewhat unexpected result of the election, had its causes been fully known to the zealous orthodox party among the members of the Free Church in Mossgiel, would have filled them with gloomy forebodings regarding a minister who owed his election, however innocently on his own part, to such tactics. The Machiavellian policy of a notorious son of Belial had been mainly instrumental in securing the election of James Hepburn. That son of Belial was none other than Mr. Laing, a man who rested under the shameful stigma of being a Moderate. He was known to hold many hotly-contested points to be questions of expediency, rather than of vital principle; and was strongly suspected of heretical leanings in the matter of organs and human hymns. Mr. Cruickshanks was wont to shake his head ominously when Mr. Laing came under discussion, and say that "yon" was a dangerous man. Still, a clear head and legal knowledge made him useful, so, on the score of these qualities, he was tolerated in more prominent positions than were the due of his religious status.

Over the question of a successor to Mr. Forsyth the community had been divided into three parties. Two of these parties were filled to overflowing with burning zeal on behalf of their respective candidates, but so nearly matched in strength as to be each more weighed down with dread of the enemy than confident of success. The third

party was both cursed and courted by both the other two as dangerously lax, and horribly likely to vote with the majority for the sake of peace. To this third party belonged Mr. Laing, and its desires were unquestionably towards Mr. Hepburn, but without very much hope of seeing them gratified. Mr. Laing had chanced to be absent from Mossiel during nearly the whole time of Mr. Hepburn's temporary ministrations there, and until the date of his visit to Dunross, in company with Mr. Rutherford, had regarded the question of his candidature with languid interest. That visit, however, had wrought a considerable change in the ex-lawyer's sentiments, but he held himself quietly in the background, and watched for his opportunity—a policy going far to justify the opinion that he was a dangerous man. After many excited discussions, and many stormy meetings, the committee at length struggled onward to the point of resolving that three candidates should be recommended to the congregation, at the impending general meeting. Then came up the tremendous question of the order in which they should be proposed, and all former conflicts were dwarfed into nothing. Louder and louder waxed the din of battle, fainter and fainter grew the prospect of any possible settlement of the question. At length, when all, save a few violent partizans, were at the point of despair, Mr. Laing, hitherto a sardonically silent spectator of the combat, seized a moment's lull in the storm to interpose with a proposition.

“What is the use of wrangling over a point upon which we shall never agree? Why not settle it as lists of names are generally settled, when precedence is a difficulty? Put them forward alphabetically.”

The zealous looked doubtful. There was a sort of *à priori* probability that a suggestion from Mr. Laing might have a

double edge ; but those who loved peace, and those who were tired and hungry, cordially supported the proposition, and after a short contest it was agreed to, and the assembly dispersed.

"I say, Laing!" exclaimed a friend, joining him as he walked towards home, "how could you make such a proposal? It puts Frazer first—the worst, and certainly the most strongly supported of the two objectionable candidates."

"Precisely, and Hepburn second, and Macintosh third. Don't you see what will happen?"

"That neither of the last two will have a chance, I should say."

"On the contrary, we are pretty safe now to get Hepburn in. Fraser will get a lot of votes ; quite enough to show Macintosh's party they have no chance. Just out of spite they'll join issue with us and vote for Hepburn, in order to keep Fraser out. Two days since I wouldn't have risked a sixpence on Hepburn's chance. Now I'd back him at almost any odds."

Thus James Hepburn became Free Church minister in Mossgiel, and in each defeated party the bitterness of personal disappointment was so charmingly tempered by the soothing contemplation of that of opponents, that the moral temperature cooled down with quite remarkable rapidity.

"Come and dine and sleep at my house any night this week you like," Mr. Laing had written to the new minister, "and I will tell you all about it."

Mr. Hepburn cordially accepted the invitation, but he promptly declined the proffered information.

"Not want to hear anything about it?" exclaimed Mr. Laing, in surprise. "Why, it was a screaming farce?"

The minister's brow contracted a little. "If you succeeded in convincing me of that, Laing," he said, "you would go far to make me send in my resignation."

"My dear fellow," remonstrated his host, "don't take things so desperately serious. There is a comic side to everything, and, upon my word, there is a side to the election of a minister which would, I think, be almost more than one could face, if one did not take off the strain a little by laughing over the comic side. However, we will be as serious as you like. Here is a list I have made out for you of the votes."

"You'll think me most ungracious all round; but if you give me that, I shall throw it into the fire without reading it. I don't want to know anything about the election. If I had been elected by a very narrow majority, out of a large number of voters, I might have felt obliged to make such investigations as would have been necessary to satisfy me that the moral force of the decision counterbalanced the numerical weakness. I would no more be forced upon a congregation by a minute fraction, than I would preach 'on approval.' Fortunately, in my case, the majority is large enough to enable me to dispense with any such disagreeable scrutiny. But I warn you, as I shall warn everyone else, that I shall hold that person an enemy, both to me and to the congregation, who forces upon me any knowledge of what has passed upon the subject."

"Meaning, of course, what has been in opposition to you."

"Meaning everything. The man who tells me that A., B., and C. were my staunch friends, and made this and that exertion on my behalf, and never mentions D., E., and F., tells me plainly, by negation, that they were no friends

of mine ; and the former will expect to stand on a different footing with me."

"Naturally ; and why not ?"

"Because I acknowledge no obligation. On the contrary, if any single member of the congregation has allowed personal feeling to influence him, or her, to vote otherwise than in accordance with an honest conviction of what was best for the congregation, I hold that voter to have been guilty of a great sin. As far as I am concerned, let the dead bury their dead. I am bound to act as minister of the whole congregation, not of any one section of it, and as far as human effort on my part can compass it, our starting-point in that relation shall be a blank sheet."

He had kindled into eagerness as he spoke. Mr. Laing made no reply for a little space. He removed his cigar from his lips, and sat gazing into the fire. At length he said—

"Would you mind stating your opinion upon one point?"

"What point?"

"Supposing Parliamentary candidates volunteered such statements at the hustings, what would be the result?"

"As regards the candidates, I should say immediate necessity for the intervention of strong bodies of police. As regards Parliament, probably a blank sheet in the matter of constituent members. But if you mean to suggest a parallel, you are wrong. There is none. In politics, questions of compromise and expediency have always rightly a place on the part of both candidate and voters. It is far otherwise where religion is in question. This makes the difference one of kind, not of degree."

"Well, my good friend," replied the lawyer, rising and throwing away the end of his cigar, "I will venture on one prophecy. You may prove a powerful, an influential,

a highly respected minister ; but you will never be a popular one."

"God forbid!" was the devout rejoinder, and they separated for the night.

This town of Mossgiel, to which James Hepburn found himself thus suddenly transferred from his moorland solitude, and in which the Free Church held an influential position, was, as has been said, somewhat hybrid in its composition. It might have been a seaport, but for the impracticable character of its coast. As it was, it turned its back rather contemptuously on the sea as though it despised its naval business, which was chiefly confined to a fair amount of fishing and an untabulated quantity of smuggling. It merely threw out a straggling fringe of its lowest streets in the direction of the beach. The principal part of the working population in the town consisted of colliers and factory hands. There was a thriving colliery about three miles distant from the town, and something near about the same distance, in another direction, just where the broad, shallow valley in which the town stood narrowed suddenly into a deep glen, running far back among the hills, stood a blanket factory, built at that particular spot in order to gain the advantage of a stream of particularly fine clear water, which flowed down the glen, joining below it a river of some size which ran into the sea at a short distance from the town.

The presence of these industries, united to the fact that there were several considerable villages, but no other town within a wide radius of Mossgiel, had made it, for its size, a busy and important place, with quite a little "society" of its own, and of course a burgh aristocracy, among whom the trials and sorrows of this mortal life chiefly asserted themselves in the shape of social rivalries and jealousies,

and struggles for precedence. The agony point of this latter difficulty had been reached in the case of the collieries and factory. The former belonged to a both legal and actual infant, the latter to a company, and both were worked under the superintendence of resident managers. What royal or imperial master of ceremonies could have decided whether Mrs. Lorrimer or Mrs. Watson was entitled to the host's arm in going to dinner? Mrs. Lorrimer stoutly asserted her rights on the plea that collieries were not as other businesses—the word trade was of course never mentioned. Did not the advertisement sheets of public papers constantly proclaim that noble lords sold coals at so much a ton? Who ever heard of a peer advertising his blankets? Mrs. Watson, on the other hand, as determinedly affirmed that coals, being supplied direct to the consumers, the business was palpably a retail one, whereas the factory was indisputably a wholesale business, therefore clearly entitled to precedence. A satisfactory adjustment of the rival claims had however been found impracticable, and a tacit compromise had been effected, by an understanding that the Lorrimers and Watsons were never invited together to any sort of entertainment where distinctly defined precedence must be accorded. They never met at dinner parties, save at each other's houses.

Mr. Laing was greatly in request at dinner parties in Mossgiel, as an unencumbered male, gifted with considerable conversational powers; and he chanced to be engaged for a rather large party at the Lorrimer's the very day after the new minister's visit to him. He prepared himself for it, picturing to himself, with some malicious amusement, the sentiments likely to be excited by the faithful report he intended to give of his interview of the previous evening. The Lorrimers were not members of the Free Church. So

much the better—they would be more likely to ask questions. If they did not, some one else would. It was well known that Mr. Hepburn had dined and slept the previous night at Mr. Laing's house. It was not in the nature of things—at least in Mossgiel—that such knowledge should not evoke a craving for further information. Mr. Laing was too astute to volunteer information which was well worth seeking. The question came, almost as soon as the servants had left the room.

Mrs. Watson, a devout worshipper of Mr. Forsyth, asked Dr. Tweedie, the leading doctor in Mossgiel, whether he had heard from him lately, and if he was deriving benefit from change of scene. This question answered, Mr. Lorrimer struck in—

“By the bye, Laing, you had your new minister with you last night, I hear. What do you think of him? If I remember rightly, you were away from home when he took Forsyth's duties for him.”

“I think,” replied Mr. Laing, with much gravity, “that, for a man who has never been in France, he has a wonderfully good accent. He made a quotation in French. I was quite surprised.” (Mr. Laing spoke French fluently.)

“Come, come, Laing,” said his host, “that won't do. You are not an English bishop being interviewed about a new appointment. What of the man as a minister? Will he be popular?”

“I told him I did not think he would be, and his answer was, ‘God forbid?’”

“What!” exclaimed Mrs. Lorrimer, “what did he mean?”

“He didn't explain,” replied Mr. Laing, gravely continuing his occupation of peeling a pear for his partner. “I imagine, though, it is a risk a man can very easily avoid if he wishes to do so.”

A murmur passed all round the table. Public attention was thoroughly aroused.

"Well, I suppose we may assume," said Mrs. Haigg, who had been an ardent supporter of Mr. Hepburn, "that that sentiment has no reference to those who have used their utmost efforts to secure his election."

"He doesn't know who they are."

"Not as yet, of course. But he will know in time."

"On the contrary, he is firmly determined not to know. He peremptorily declined all information. He said he should hold the person who forced upon him any knowledge on the subject an enemy to both him and the congregation."

"I never heard anything so extraordinary. How is he to know who are his friends and who his enemies?"

"That also, he is resolved not to know. He disclaims all sense of obligation—says the voter who acted under the influence of any other feeling than conscientious conviction, has been guilty of a great sin; that he is minister of the whole congregation, and will start fair with a blank sheet."

"By Jove!" burst in Mr. Watson, with whom business had not gone altogether smoothly that day, and who was consequently irritable, "that's cool—the most convenient way of shaking yourself free of your obligations I ever heard of. I should think that notion would spread rapidly among ministers. I shouldn't wonder to hear, next, he has conscientious scruples about paying his bills. I'm precious glad I didn't vote for him."

"At any rate," said Mr. Lorrimer, "one thing seems pretty clear. You've got a minister with considerable originality about him."

"A thing I hate," replied Mr. Watson—"simply means a man taking his own way about everything, without in the least heeding anyone else's wishes or opinions, and then pre-

tending he didn't know they had any. To say a man's very original seems to me only another way of saying he's monstrously disagreeable."

"Oh, my dear," interposed his wife, a person constantly spoken of by her admirers as a very superior woman, the full force of whose character was, however, only to be appreciated by those who had seen Mrs. Lorrimer walk before her, "you are letting prejudice run away with you. People can be disagreeable without being in the least original. As we didn't vote for Mr. Hepburn his determination is so much clear gain to us, and you know you liked his preaching very much, when he was here last year."

"So did I," said Mrs. Lorrimer, "when I went one day with Mrs. Tweedie to hear him. If you came to our church, Mr. Watson, you would be more sensitive about the common place, than the original. I fear we shall see a great many empty seats ere long. Shall we go to the drawing-room, and leave the gentlemen to dispute over the poor man?"

Mrs. Lorrimer had suggested the move of deliberate purpose. The Free Church was strongly represented in her house that night, and personal feeling still ran high. In the drawing-room she had recourse to a cruel expedient. She was not an ill-natured woman, in the main, but what could she do? She had a bevy of idle women on her hands, for half an hour at least, many of them strongly at variance on a burning question. Where could she hope to find safety, save in the production of some more interesting victim for sacrifice? She tried for some little time to keep up a desultory chat on indifferent topics, but it would not do. Conversation would veer round to the dangerous quarter, so at last, in desperation, she laid her victim on the altar.

"I met Lady Ellinor Farquharson, as I was driving this afternoon," she said; "she was on horseback. How well

she looks in a habit ! But she was riding such a wild looking horse, I cannot think how General Farquharson can allow her to ride such wild looking animals. It can not be safe."

"Allow !" repeated Mrs. Haigg, scornfully, "as if he had any voice in the matter ! If he could allow or disallow anything, there are more important things for him to think about than wild horses. If you met her, I suppose it was not long before you stumbled upon Sir Maurice Adair."

"I did not see him anywhere," said Mrs. Lorrimer rather coldly.

"No, indeed," struck in Mrs. Jardine, the wife of a civil engineer, "nor could you have done so unless you had very long sight, for he was twelve miles away. He was over at the Pitcairn Collieries. My husband was there with him all day. There is some doubt whether they have not run a shaft under Sir Maurice's land. My husband says it needs very careful engineering to find out, and that if it is so the penalty is very heavy. It will be quite a windfall for Sir Maurice if it should prove to be the case."

"Or for Lady Ellinor," suggested Mrs. Haigg.

"Hush, hush ! that is too bad," exclaimed Mrs. Lorrimer. "She may be giddy and imprudent, but that is going too far."

"Have we a right to use even as strong terms as giddy and imprudent ?" said Mrs. Tweedie. "Sir Maurice Adair is quite as often to be seen with General Farquharson as with Lady Ellinor. That fact should surely be sufficient evidence."

"Oh !" sneered Mrs. Haigg, "we don't of course expect Mrs. Tweedie to see any fault in Lady Ellinor, being honoured with her personal friendship."

"Lady Ellinor Farquharson belongs to quite a different circle of society from mine, Mrs. Haigg. I should not

dream of calling her a friend. My father was in her grandfather's service for many years, though I don't suppose she knows that. Our acquaintance is quite accidental, and certainly not of my seeking. I much regret that Lady Ellinor is not a little more cautious; so beautiful a woman, married to a man old enough to be her father, has great need of circumspection. But I know her to be a most generous kind-hearted woman, and one who never says an ill-natured word of any one."

"Wise enough not to throw stones," retorted Mrs. Haigg, greatly nettled by this last thrust. But the remark was lost in a query from Mrs. Wylie, the young wife of a local lawyer, who set up for a beauty.

"Is General Farquharson so very much older? I am not sure we should think so if we saw Lady Ellinor before she was made up in the morning."

"Her father and mother were married on the same day that I was," replied Mrs. Tweedie, "just thirty years ago. Lady Ellinor was the second child. She must be just about twenty-seven years of age now."

"Oh, of course, we must give in then. Lady Ellinor is ably defended. I wonder what our new minister will think, Mrs. Haigg, to find a notoriously fast woman such a favourite with the ladies of his congregation?"

"What's that about a fast woman and our minister?" asked Mr. Laing, who had entered unobserved during the last speech. "Have you unearthed some scandal about Hepburn already?"

"Oh, dear, no."

"Then you are, of course, running down Lady Ellinor Farquharson. But what has Hepburn to do with her?"

"Nothing, I should hope, for his own sake," said Mrs. Haigg.

"Why should you say 'for his sake?'" asked Mr. Laing. "There isn't much that most men would not give for the chance of winning a smile from Lady Ellinor Farquharson."

"What! a minister?" almost screamed Mrs. Haigg.

"My dear madam, ministers are not a special breed. They are much like other men, only I grant you they have to try and look as if they weren't. I was lucky, or unlucky enough, once to get a smile from Lady Ellinor. She chanced to drop her riding whip just as I was passing, so I picked it up for her. I don't believe I have ever slept really soundly since. Why should Hepburn be different. He's only a deal younger than I am. What will you wager me that he isn't over head and ears in love before he has been here six months? Upon my word, I do not wonder you all hate Lady Ellinor. If I were a married woman I don't think I should ever know a moment's peace, if I lived within ten miles of Strathellon."

What storm this vile insinuation would have evoked it is impossible to say. At the moment the door opened, and a group of husbands entered, whose innocent minds it was at least prudent not to contaminate. Mr. Laing, demurely stroking his moustache, threw a glance of malicious satisfaction round the room, and then went and sat down beside Mrs. Tweedie, who was shaking with suppressed laughter.

"You deserve a gold medal," she said.

"Perhaps. But all the same, I heartily wish there had been no opportunity to deserve it."

"They must chatter. Perhaps it is as well they should chatter about some one their chatter cannot reach."

"I did not mean that exactly. I was thinking about Lady Ellinor. Do you think she's quite safe?"

Mrs. Tweedie shook her head. "I hardly know about

the safety, but certainly she is not very prudent. At present I am sure there is nothing but a harmless flirtation, on her part at least. But I hardly think that safe. Sir Maurice is a fascinating man in his way."

"Which I suppose you mean to imply that General Farquharson is not."

"Indeed, no. I hardly know him. My meeting with Lady Ellinor was quite accidental, and she kept up the acquaintance; but I hardly ever see him. He does not look quite the right sort of husband for such a bright fresh lively young creature."

"He is a fine looking man, but he must be an immense deal older than she is. I should think he would not be a very lively companion; a sort of incarnate Queen's Regulations."

"Yes, there is a great deal of military formality about him. That just makes the companionship of a man like Sir Maurice Adair more dangerous. Change the subject," she added hastily, perceiving that Mrs. Haigg was bearing down upon them.

Mrs. Lorrimer did not count that dinner party one of her greatest social successes, and registered a vow that in future she would mix her guests a little more. It might be sweet for brethren to dwell together in unity, but it was clearly safer, at a dinner party, not to have too many who belonged to the same religious community.

CHAPTER III.

BLACK SHEEP IN MOSSGIEL.

IT might be safely affirmed that, being such as he was, society in Mossiel was not very likely to find in James Hepburn a tender and enlightened sympathiser in the social perplexities and anxieties with which it was so sorely harassed. It is even to be feared that he would have regarded the question of Mrs. Lorrimer's or Mrs. Watson's precedence with the callous indifference of a coarse, uncultured society instinct; that he might even have been capable of the brutal suggestion that the vexed question should be decided by priority of age.

"When are you coming into residence?" Mr. Laing asked him one day, during one of his preliminary visits to the town.

"As soon as I can possibly arrange to do so. It seems to me there is a great deal of putting in order wanted at the manse. It will be some time before I can get into it."

"Don't trouble your head about that," Mr. Laing replied. "Come and make my house your home for as long as you like, the longer the better. I shall be delighted to have your society."

This suggestion was not wholly prompted by hospitable motives. Mr. Laing had a touch of the sardonic in his composition, and anticipated no small amusement from watching the initiatory proceedings of the new minister. Moreover, he was a man of more intellectual cultivation than most of his fellow townsmen, and therefore hailed with

much satisfaction the prospect of some friendly intercourse with an accomplished scholar.

Mr. Hepburn duly arrived at the house of his hospitable entertainer, in the afternoon of the day preceding that fixed for his induction, and Mr. Laing amused himself, in the evening, with a vivid description of all the social agonies and dilemmas to which the arrangements for his reception had given rise.

“You see the person who should capture and exhibit you would score a social triumph, a sort of certificate of title to precedence. If the Lorrimers had belonged to us I believe there would have been blood shed. Mrs. Watson had arranged most charmingly for a great dinner party to-morrow evening, at which she hoped to secure the presence of all the Presbytery. But it was pointed out to her that she must ask Cruikshanks. He is pretty nearly the largest contributor to our church funds; but he unmistakably keeps a shop. She would never have been able to hold up her head in Mrs. Lorrimer’s presence again. But hulloa, am I treading in the wrong place again?” he broke off, noticing the grave expression which had gathered upon his visitor’s face.

“Oh, dear no! I don’t set up for such a sensitive plant as that; but I’ve lived much the life of a recluse for the last twelve years, and have almost had time to forget the society aspect of life. Your words awoke some unpleasant echoes, that was all. Social cruxes have, however, stood me in good stead this time. I shouldn’t like to have stood out against the arrangement; but the day of one’s induction into such a charge as this is not just the occasion one would choose for chattering small talk at a dinner party.”

Then he relapsed into silence for a brief space and sat gazing thoughtfully into the fire. At last he suddenly asked :

"Who about here rides? What lady I mean?"

Mr. Laing started. The remembrance of his random shafts of malice in Mrs. Lorrimer's drawing-room flashed across him. He eyed his visitor closely.

"Question for question," he replied. "Is that what you have been pondering over for the last five minutes?"

"I? Certainly not. I was prosaically meditating whether a saddle horse would not be very useful to me sometimes. I shouldn't care to ride the pony I have. He would hardly be up to my weight unless he had a much better shoulder than he has. That was the connection of ideas which brought to my remembrance that just as the train ran into the station to-day, I saw a lady at a little distance on what appeared to be a very good horse. That was all."

"It must have been Lady Ellinor Farquharson. She is the only lady about here who rides."

"Who is she? I don't remember to have heard the name."

"I daresay not. I don't think they had come to Strathellon when you were here. She only married General Farquharson about two years since, and there was a great deal to be done to the house. I don't think it was ready for them till after you left."

"And so lately married? General Farquharson cannot be a very young man, surely?"

"Twenty years older than she is, at least. She is not only young, but exceedingly beautiful."

"Is she? I must manage to see her. I don't believe I ever saw a very beautiful woman in my life. How far off is Strathellon?"

"About four miles. But you need not walk so far as that, in search of a chance of singeing your wings. Lady Ellinor sometimes visits Mrs. Tweedie. She might find you an opportunity, if you confided your wishes to her."

"Singe my wings," repeated the minister, with a somewhat puzzled intonation.

"Yes. Don't you think it might be possible?"

"Don't you think, considering our relative social positions, and individual circumstances, the idea savours a little of the grotesque?"

"Far from it. My experience, as far as it goes, would rather suggest that it savoured a good deal of the probable."

Mr. Hepburn threw back his head with a short laugh. "What a chance for the congregation! The minister drooping and pining away under a hopeless attachment to the wife of General Farquharson! Why, there would not be standing room in the church. But is she then so dangerously beautiful?"

"She is wonderfully beautiful, or, perhaps, I should rather say, there is a wonderful fascination about her beauty. I cannot say with you, that I have never seen a beautiful woman. In fact, in my time I have seen some of the most celebrated beauties of their day. But I never saw anyone whose beauty had the peculiar charm of Lady Ellinor Farquharson's. I don't know what it is. I have seen more perfect features, and more faultless form, yet her peculiar charm has been wanting."

"Well, if I perish, I perish, but clearly it will be on the altar of no unworthy divinity. Reassure yourself, however, I shall contemplate her only as I would some very beautiful picture."

"You will intend to do so, I have no doubt. Unfortunately, in this world our intentions do not always shape our actions. But to return to mundane things, Lady Ellinor Farquharson having suggested the mention of Mrs. Tweedie, I heard from the latter that you want a housekeeper."

"Yes, I do."

"I know the very person for you if you can come to terms—an old client of mine, who still comes to me for advice. She is the widow of a small tradesman, with just enough to live upon, and no encumbrances save an orphan niece, a bonnie lassie of about eighteen years of age. The good woman is in great trouble about her just now, and came to consult me just after I had seen Mrs. Tweedie. The girl has made some acquaintances her aunt does not like, among others with a certain uncommonly handsome young ne'er-do-weel, belonging to a family of whom you'll probably hear a good deal before you have been here very long. He seems rather to have caught the girl's fancy, and her aunt is very anxious to move farther away from his neighbourhood. She came to consult me about trying to let her cottage. Why should you not take her and the girl? They'd be well out of the way at your manse, more so than in any house of their own, and they would make you very comfortable."

"It seems an excellent scheme."

"I'll send for her to come and see you, then. She is an excellent cook, and a very clean, tidy, managing woman."

"Very good, and now, it being, as you may observe, to-morrow morning, we had better retire."

That special induction at Mossgiel was universally felt to be a tame, rather uninteresting one. James Hopburn lacked the seductive charm of absolute novelty. His manner, his voice, his preaching, were all to some extent familiar. Dark suspicions, it is true, lurked in the minds of the more rigid of his congregation as to whether he would prove to be quite sound, whether his orthodoxy would stand the strain of these specious arguments respecting the necessity of moulding time-honoured customs into some measure of conformity with altered conditions, wherewith a clamour for

dangerous innovations is apt to be supported, but that was a point which time alone could determine. There was no prospect of detecting any unsuspected personal peculiarity, which might impart a new and agreeable flavour to afternoon tea table gossip. If only they had known of that deadly accusation, about the Koran!—and they only missed knowing it by a hair's-breadth. It was from Sir Maurice Adair's house the vile accuser had walked over to Dunross, and Sir Maurice, chancing to be one afternoon in Mossiel, went into Mr. Cruikshanks' shop—the principal stationer's and bookseller's shop in the town, and the post office to boot—to settle some postal business. Mr. Hepburn's name chancing to be mentioned, Sir Maurice was on the point of twitting Mr. Cruikshanks with the election of a minister who knew more about the Koran than about Holy Scripture, when Dr. Tweedie's entrance checked his purpose, and the fateful words remained unspoken.

Mr. Laing fulfilled his promise, and duly arranged for an interview between the minister and his widowed client, burdened with the sore responsibility of a too attractive niece; that frolicsome lamb who was to be guarded from wolves by being kept under the very eye of the shepherd. Mrs. Findlay did not hesitate to admit that that view of the case mainly influenced her in her wish to make an arrangement with Mr. Hepburn.

"But is she very giddy?" he asked. "That would hardly do for the manse, you know."

"Oh no, sir. She is no a glaikit lassie; but she's young, and Rob Blackwood's an unco gude lookin' chiel, an' fair spoken, there's nae twa ways about that."

"What are these Blackwoods?" asked the minister, remembering Mr. Laing's words. "Do they belong to the Free Church?"

"As much as they belong to ony church, sir, and that's no but sayin' there's aye tares amang the wheat. As to what they are, that's mair than ony body can richly say. Sandy Blackwood's been a sort o' foreman, some way, at the blanket factory this mony a year, an' he's a clever man at his wark, there's nae doubt, sae Mr. Watson lets him bide on, though they've a heap o' wark wi' him whiles, when he tak's a drinkin' fit. But he get's nae mair than twenty-five shillings a week, an' ye may easily see, sir, that wi' rent to pay out o't, it wiuna keep four great strappin' sons, forbye a daughter, idlin' at hame, whiles takin' a turn at this, or a turn at that, but never stoppin' onywhere, an' aye dressed oot wi' the best, an' siller in their pockets forbye. It's clean out o' reason, an' naebody kens whar the money comes frae; though folk do say Adam, the eldest son, has been in trouble when he was awa in England about passin' flash money."

"And this Robert?"

"I'll no say but Rob's the best o' the lot; but he's idle, an' I'll no hae him daunderin' after Mary if I can hinder it. An' I'll awa to the manse the morn, sir, an' see to gettin' it cleaned out the moment the men are out o't."

"Tell me more about these Blackwoods," the minister said to his host that evening. "I suppose, from what you said, you know something about them."

"I do. They are a rather uncommon family. The father is monstrously clever, a man who should have got on remarkably well, only he is so terribly given to drinking not systematically, but by fits and starts. He is foreman over some department at the factory, and Watson has said, again and again, he did not think he could continue to put up with him. But he is so uncommonly useful, when he is sober, that the time of his final dismissal is perpetually deferred until the next outbreak."

“Has he a wife?”

“She is dead. Poor thing, she had epileptic fits at times. She was fond of bathing, and took one, one day, in the water, and was drowned. At least that’s the story. But it is said the fits made her troublesome, and that had our Fiscal been a little sharper that story might perhaps have been exploded. But I don’t know. She must have been a very beautiful woman, and all her children take after her in that. They are all remarkably good looking.”

“And maintain themselves?”

“Ah! there’s the rub. I see Mrs. Findlay has been enlightening you. Small wonder she objects. I fear they’ve got hold of the fact that pretty Mary Warrender has a hundred and fifty pounds to come to her when she comes of age. I suspect General Farquharson’s gamekeepers could supply you with a good many hypotheses, but I don’t think anyone has much certainty about them. I heard a story the other day. I’ll make you a present of it, for what it is worth. There has been a small grocer’s shop opened, within the last few months, in a quiet side street. Somehow a strong idea has got abroad that our excellent elder, Cruikshanks, is at the back of it. Unquestionably, monstrously good tea, tobacco, and spirits, are sold there at a very moderate price, for ready money; and the Blackwoods are constantly there.”

“Did the mother drink?”

“Oh, no! She was a quiet, respectable woman.”

“Intemperance and epilepsy—a terrible heritage.”

“Hulloa, Hepburn, are you one of the modern theorists? My dear fellow, if you don’t stick close to the good old doctrine of original sin, and leave alone all new-fangled heresis about responsibility in crime, you’ll live to curse the day you set foot in Mossiel.”

“There are two questions mixed up there. To talk about

original sin is one thing. To be quite sure we have exhaustive knowledge of what original sin means is quite a different thing. But I'm not going to run my head against a post. I don't know enough about the subject myself ; but one can't help seeing that certain indisputable scientific facts raise difficult questions. As far as my present concern with the matter goes, it will only make me watch those Blackwoods with considerable interest."

The next few weeks Mr. Hepburn spent manfully, if not altogether agreeably, in making himself generally acquainted with his congregation, and in patiently receiving much excellent advice. Has any layman an idea of the copious and varied amount of good counsel which is eagerly pressed upon ministers under these circumstances? It was something new to Mr. Hepburn, and being, by nature and training, inclined to perhaps slightly excessive candour, he got into trouble once or twice before he learned to listen and hold his peace.

And all the time, if only the feminine sheep of his flock could have known it, a most unministerial desire was cherished in his bosom. None other than that he might chance to meet Lady Ellinor Farquharson. It had struck himself as strange that he should have been able to say, at his age, that he had never seen a very beautiful woman. He had never thought much about the subject before, but now, knowing a beautiful one was actually living so close at hand, he was seized with a strong desire for a chance of ending this abnormal state of things. To Mr. Laing's half-jesting warnings he never gave a thought. He never dreamed of speaking to Lady Ellinor. It was curiosity pure and simple. She was nothing more to him than a beautiful picture, or a beautiful landscape would have been.

That any opportunity should ever be afforded him of

perishing a victim to the charms of Lady Ellinor Farquharson, unless his nature was of a wonderfully inflammable kind, certainly did not seem very probable. Beyond the precincts of Mossiel the constitution of society was of a wholly different character. Its component parts were presumably far less heavily weighted with a sense of their own importance, but they were few; for the properties were large, and some of them valueless, as far as society was concerned. There were the Munros, an old Roman Catholic family, holding themselves somewhat aloof from their heretic neighbours, and depending for society chiefly on periodical visits from other families of their own persuasion. Another large property had lately passed to an English family, the Chamberlaynes, who as yet had rarely come to it save for a few weeks during the shooting season. Then Sir Maurice Adair was unmarried, and somewhat of a wanderer. Strathellon, the largest property in the neighbourhood, was the nearest to Mossiel, and upon it therefore mainly centred the watchful interest of that sprightly town, a fact which under existing circumstances was, as might be gathered from the tenor of conversation at Mrs. Lorrimer's dinner party, not just the most desirable one possible for the interests of its beautiful young mistress.

General Farquharson had not been many years in possession of Strathellon. He had succeeded to the property unexpectedly, on the death of a miserly cousin, and had found himself suddenly transformed from an officer of high ability and repute, into an exceedingly wealthy landed proprietor. He had thus become a prize in the matrimonial market, and was held a great catch for the eldest of four daughters of a not very wealthy peer. He did not altogether relish the changed conditions of his life; but he was an upright, honourable man, with whom—if not quite the incarnation

of the Queen's Regulations, which Mr. Laing had declared him to be—duty was, both by nature and habit, omnipotent. As he had been a first-rate soldier, so he would at least strive to be a first-rate landed proprietor, and an unimpeachable husband. That he was exactly a suitable one for a beautiful high-spirited woman of twenty-five years of age—the age at which Lady Ellinor Forbes became his wife—might be doubtful. It had never occurred to him, up to the time of his marriage, that he had a heart. Whether he had then discovered it was best known to himself. He was very certain to treat his young wife with affectionate and chivalrous courtesy, and to surround her with every luxury; and only perhaps fairly chargeable with looking at the subject from a wrong point of view, in holding that it would be an insult to Lady Ellinor to exercise any sort of watchfulness over her actions.

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CHAPTER IV.

STRATHELLON.

ONE of the farthest outlying members of James Hepburn's congregation was a respectable farmer, who lived some six miles distant from Mossgiel. He had long been slowly wasting under the progress of an incurable internal complaint, and had been a source of much mental perplexity to poor Mr. Forsyth. In his capacity of minister he had regularly visited the sufferer, and endeavored to impress upon him, after the most orthodox fashion, a sense of sinfulness, of the need of pardon and sanctifying grace, only to be met with the stereotyped reply, that he did not see he was any worse than other people. He had been a regular church-goer when his health allowed, had never been a drunkard, a libertine, a swearer, or a gambler. He had always paid his lawful debts, and never done any harm. This position Mr. Forsyth had found impregnable, and the fact had caused him much mental distress. He was so certain that he had faithfully delivered a true Gospel message that this continued hardness of heart suggested very painful subjects for reflection, and the case had weighed upon him so heavily that he had made special notes for the guidance of his successor.

Over these notes James Hepburn had smiled a little sardonically, and he had carefully avoided all reference to distinctly religious topics during his earlier visits to the invalid. But one day he chanced to make an impression when, sad to say, he was conscious of being somewhat out

of temper, and was rather inclined to tax himself with having spoken inadvisedly with his tongue.

His equanimity had been sorely tried during the earlier part of the day. A collier had met with a very severe accident, and the minister, hastening to the house, had found everything in about as pitiable a condition as could well be imagined—a poverty-stricken abode; the man seriously injured; his wife expecting almost daily an addition to a tribe of ill-fed, ill-clothed children; and disorder, dirt and confusion reigning paramount. What could a man do? He hurried to Mrs. Watson's house. She could be both kind and energetic when she chose. She would be of far more use than he could possibly be.

Mrs. Watson was at home, but in no state of mind to give more than a fraction of her attention to his story. All her faculties were concentrated on a great social disaster. She had rashly accepted an invitation to dine the previous evening at the house of an acquaintance who was a trifle outside society in Mossgiel. Mrs. Lorrimer had been there, and had been accorded precedence. Mr. Hepburn had to listen, with what patience he might, to a circumstantial account of her wrongs before he could even induce her to hear his urgent appeal and strenuous assertions of the instant need for action. When at last he did succeed in faintly arousing her interest, he still left the house very doubtful whether, if some visitor should call whose sympathies she could evoke on her own account, she would not forget all about the matter.

This little society episode left him in a state of exasperation, a mental condition in which his somewhat blunt candour was apt to overrun the bounds of discretion; and on this day, of all days, during an afternoon visit to Braehead Farm, the conversation took, for the first time, a

decidedly religious one. The invalid, doubtless expecting the usual delivery of the Gospel message, instantly hoisted his generally successful defences; and the morality and respectability pleas were set up.

"True enough," replied Mr. Hepburn, "I daresay. But you might have sinned a good deal in all these respects without your life being necessarily so utterly at variance with the very fundamental principles of Christianity, as the career of respectable selfishness on which you pride yourself."

"What!" exclaimed the hearer. "Do you mean to say it doesn't matter whether a man is a drunkard and profligate or not?"

"Certainly I don't mean to say anything of the kind. What I do mean to say is, that a man who leads the hard, cold, selfish sort of life you credit yourself with is such a long way off Christianity altogether that one can hardly see how the moral law applies to him at all. His respectability keeps him out of the hands of the police, and is therefore so much clear gain to the ratepayer; that is about all."

The invalid was silent for a few moments. "Well, that's an odd way to put things," he said at last. "Mr. Forsyth made it out quite different."

"Very likely. Ministers are very apt to get so saturated with theology that they can't get at any other aspect of a question. I've known ministers who would give a theological turn to a discussion on the best shape for a ploughshare. You can think over the matter till I come again; I must go now."

James Hepburn drove away from the farm somewhat startled at the evident impression his words had produced. He was very conscious that they were little more than an outburst of suppressed irritation. The line of argument

was certainly very wide of any he had intended to take. He turned his pony's head homewards, so absorbed in meditation on the subject that he was hardly conscious of the figure of a woman, wearing a dark, close-fitting ulster, and walking slowly along the road before him, until he overtook her, and was sharply aroused from his absorption by the perception that she had turned towards him, and was speaking. He hastily pulled up, and glanced down at her, then, with a quick flush, raised his hat. He had no need to speculate as to who the speaker might be; and never again would he say he had never seen a beautiful woman. The lovely face, turned towards him with a perplexed, disturbed look, could belong to no one save Lady Ellinor Farquharson.

"Have you seen a carriage anywhere on the road?" she asked, "a pony carriage, with a pair of mouse coloured ponies."

"I have only come a few hundred yards along the road," he replied. "I came down from Braehead Farm."

"I cannot think what can have happened," she said, turning her head to look along the road. "I am Lady Ellinor Farquharson. I went to see an old servant, and sent the carriage on with a message. It was to come back for me. I thought I would walk a little way and let it overtake me; but it should have returned long since. I am afraid there must have been some accident."

"I will drive back at once and try to find out."

"Thank you very much. But, wait a moment, here comes a boy running; perhaps he is bringing some message."

She stood watching the approaching lad, and he sat watching her, his unpractised judgment cordially endorsing the dictum of Mr. Laing's more mature experience. There was a wonderful fascination about her beauty.

The messenger shortly came up, panting grievously, "Ye're no to wait for yer carriage, men," he gasped. "It canna win to ye. Jamie Henderson's janker brak doon just comin' oot o' Graigend wood; an' there's an awfu' big lump o' a tree clean ower the road. They'll no get it awa' this lang while."

"Then Jamie Henderson's a stupid dunce," said Lady Ellinor.

"May be; but that'll no clear the road."

A flash of amusement, like a sudden gleam of light, passed over the beautiful face. She laughed a low musical laugh.

"You young Socrates! there's a shilling to buy a new pair of lungs. I'm sure you have ruined yours." Then she turned again to the minister.

"Thank you very much for your kind offer, but you see it is needless for me to trouble you. I must just make the best of it, and walk home."

"Is there no other way by which your carriage can reach you?"

"Not without going too far to make it of any use."

"But you are a long way from Strathellon."

She gave a little shrug. "Over five miles. It will be quite dark by the time I get home. All the keepers will be out with guns and lanterns. It cannot be helped!"

He sprang out of his dogcart, and was by her side in a moment. "Probably Lady Ellinor Farquharson you do not know who I am. My name is Hepburn. I am the Free Church minister. I have not been long in Mossiel. Will you condescend to make use of my humble dogcart, and let me drive you to Strathellon?"

"There will be no condescension, Mr. Hepburn, but a great deal of good fortune in such a lucky encounter. I

confess I have no great inclination for the walk. I thank you very much indeed for your kind offer."

Then he received that smile of which Mr. Laing had spoken, and in truth, though it did not threaten him with total loss of sleep, it did make his heart beat a little quicker. He helped her into the dogcart, and took his place beside her. Strange turn of fortune's wheel! The utmost limit of his wildest dream had been of an occasional chance of a glance as she passed him, either driving or on horseback; and this was the result of their first meeting. A hitherto unknown sensation began to steal over him. When he told Mr. Laing to reassure himself, he had not added what was, however, in his thoughts at the moment; that Lady Ellinor Farquharson must always be to him, too much an embodiment of society, for him to escape feeling a certain vague hostility towards her. Now that sentiment had vanished. With that lovely face close to his shoulder, the man conquered the aggrieved citizen, and a strange feeling of shyness came stealing over him. He could not think of any remark wherewith to begin a conversation. Lady Ellinor, however, speedily released him from his embarrassment.

"This is a very informal way of making acquaintance, Mr. Hepburn," she said, "but I am very pleased to have the chance. I have often heard of you since you came to Mossiel. My maid belongs to the Free Church, and you have an ardent worshipper in her. I believe I shall rise enormously in her estimation when she hears that I have actually been driving in your dogcart."

"A rather lowly, and, I fear, the reverse of luxurious honour," he said.

"It is a very comfortable one, which is more than can always be said for what is luxurious. When I was a girl

at home, I and my next sister had a delightful little old rattletrap of our own, in which we used to drive about. It was not half so respectable as your dogcart. We very nearly quarrelled when I was married, as to which should have it; but General Farquharson settled the dispute by saying he would not let me use it; that everyone would think he was too stingy to give me a decent carriage, so I had to submit to paint and varnish, and immaculate harness, and try to look as if I was not rather ashamed of myself."

"Ashamed of yourself," he repeated.

"Yes. Why not? Why should I, who am young and strong, and could walk miles without being tired, go driving luxuriously about the country, while numbers who are sickly, or old and feeble, have to toil along on foot?"

"Are you a communist?" he asked, with a smile.

"Not that I know of. I don't think I'm anything in particular, save a woman much overpampered with luxuries, and who would doubtless raise a dismal outcry were any one of them wanting. Still, I confess, sometimes when I am whirled past some poor feeble-looking creature, who is toiling painfully along the road, I do feel a sort of sense of shame, and all the glitter and show seems like an ostentatious vaunting of my superior advantages. I did not feel it half so much in my little old carriage."

Mr. Hepburn did not immediately reply. The fair patriot had planted a thrust. He had often given a lift to a toiling pedestrian, but her view of the subject had never occurred to him. Was it possible that she, the spoiled child of rank and fortune, had really a keener sympathy with the toiling, burdened multitude than he had himself—he the man of the people? Was she attitudinizing? That any one should possess a larger share of any virtue than we feel

conscious of possessing ourselves is apt to seem to us inherently improbable, and the question presented itself to his mind with sufficient distinctness to make her next remark a little startling,

"I daresay you think I am posing as an angel of light, in order to give a minister a good opinion of me. But I am not. The sentiment doesn't lead to any practical result, so I suppose it only merits to be called sentimentality."

"I wonder if your sentiment, or sentimentality, would have led to any practical result, if you had seen what I saw this morning?"

"What was that?"

He briefly but graphically described the scene, watching her face as he did so. There was no mistaking the effect. Her face flushed and her dilated eyes filled with tears. She gulped down something like a sob as she exclaimed—

"Oh, Mr. Hepburn, how dreadful! Could we not go there at once? If we left word at the lodge, in case the carriage should return."

He thought of Mrs. Watson, and smiled a little grimly.

"No," he said; "there is no such instant need as that. They will do for to-night. Perhaps you could send them something to-morrow."

"Send something," she repeated scornfully. "Yes, as I should send some delicacy to the kennels if a favourite dog was ill. I will go directly after breakfast to-morrow, and get Mrs. Tweedie to go with me, and see what we can do. We must get the children taken charge of for a time. I can easily manage that, and Mrs. Tweedie must find a trustworthy nurse to look after her. We shall be able to make things better for them, I am sure."

James Hepburn began to feel his notions regarding society become a little confused. To get a sovereign offered

to him to expend for the sufferers had been about the utmost he expected. Lady Ellinor Farquharson appeared to have an eminently practical mind.

Some further desultory conversation over the case filled up the time till they reached the entrance to Strathellon. Then, as they passed through the gates, Lady Ellinor said—

“You must stay and dine with us, Mr. Hepburn, and let General Farquharson thank you for your timely rescue of his forlorn spouse.”

“Oh, thank you, you are very kind; but I must beg you to excuse me.”

“Why? I know you are thinking about your boots. Men always do. But you need not mind. We are quite alone.”

“I was not thinking about my boots,” he bluntly replied.

“What, then?”

“I don't belong to your social circle, Lady Ellinor. I should be out of place at your table. I don't understand your Shibboleths. I should be perpetually violating some law of the Medes and Persians, and you would be saying to yourself—‘What a boor! Why, he is only fit to dine in the servants' hall.’ I don't understand your ways.”

He saw her colour change and her eye flash, and there was a touch of cold hauteur in her voice as she replied—

“You are right. You do not understand our ways. When men of learning, high personal character, and ability, accept invitations to our houses, where we have nothing to offer save those luxuries which are a mere question of money, we feel that they do us honour. I am sorry you do not feel inclined to grant that honour to General Farquharson and myself.”

She had the best of it, and he knew it. He knew that he deserved the rebuke for having allowed a momentary suspicion that he was to be paid off for his services by an

invitation to dinner, to betray him into making a very un-
courteous speech. He turned frankly to her.

"Forgive me, Lady Ellinor, I have a little touch of the
misanthrope about me. My nature has been a little warped
by circumstances. My rude speech was inexcusable. I
can only ask you to forgive it. I will do just what you
like about dining with you."

She smiled brightly on him. "I would like you to dine
with us very much. General Farquharson is a very well-
informed man, and I am afraid, sometimes, I am a very
poor companion for him. It will be a great pleasure to him
to have your society for an evening."

"What will he think if he sees your approach?" he said,
a turn of the road bringing them at the moment in full
view of the house. "I fear he will be much alarmed——"

"About his ponies—yes," and there was unquestionable
bitterness in the tone. Then, with a catch of her breath,
she hastily added, "He will see at once there is nothing
amiss with me."

The minister caught the intonation, and made a mental
note. Some floating straws of Mossiel gossip had drifted
in his direction. When they reached the entrance, General
Farquharson, a fine military-looking man, of middle age,
was standing on the steps, his face wearing an expression
of unmistakable anxiety.

"My dearest Ellinor," he exclaimed, apparently quite
unconscious of Mr. Hepburn's existence, "has there been
an accident? You are not hurt, my love?"

The quick flush came again, and her eyes filled with tears.
But behind the General was standing a portly butler, and
in the farther background a gradation of subordinates in
livery, all their faces set to a regulation expression of
alarmed anxiety, and she answered lightly—

"I am not valuable enough to come to grief, Stuart. Some timber broke down and blocked the road while the carriage was gone on with your note; so it could not get back. I should have had to walk, only fortunately I fell in with Mr. Hepburn, who kindly brought me home. He has promised to stay and dine with us."

"I am very pleased to hear it. I am greatly indebted to you, Mr. Hepburn. Lady Ellinor's prolonged absence would have caused me much alarm, especially as she has not had the ponies she was driving very long. Ellinor you look cold; go and take off your wraps, and we will join you presently, when tea is ready, in the drawing-room."

He led the way to the library as he spoke "Yes, indeed, Mr Hepburn," he continued, after they had entered the room, "you have laid me under a very deep obligation. I am not perfectly satisfied about those ponies; but Lady Ellinor took an immense fancy to them, and I did not like to cross her. Had she been as late in reaching home as she must have been, but for your interposition, I should have been exceedingly alarmed lest want of due caution on my part had endangered her safety."

What did it all mean? There was a slight trace of military precision and stiffness in General Farquharson's manner, but nothing could be clearer than that he in no way merited his wife's bitter insinuation about the ponies. His anxiety for her safety was unmistakable. That faintly perceptible jarring of domestic harmony roused anxious thoughts in the minister's mind; and had he remembered Mr. Laing's warnings, he might have been fain to admit their possible foundation. He already felt that he would gladly lay down his life to avert sorrow or disaster from that beautiful creation which had just vanished from his sight, slowly ascending the broad staircase of Strathellon.

When about half-an-hour afterwards Lady Ellinor Farquharson descended to the drawing-room, she found tea waiting, and her guest the solitary occupant of the room.

"All alone, Mr. Hepburn?" she said. "How is that? Where is General Farquharson?"

"Someone wanted to speak to him, so I came here with the tea. I don't mean, you know, that I carried in the tray."

"Heavens! I hope not."

"Why not?" he asked, seized by a sudden whim to parade social inferiority, and see how she would take it. "One of my grandfathers was a butler in his younger days."

"Very likely. But unless you can prove that, like pointing among dogs, carrying trays is an inherited instinct, I don't see what that has to do with it. But I was only thinking indirectly of you. I was panic-stricken at the thought of my pet tea cups being placed in such imminent danger, to say nothing of the chance of my finding an impromptu bread and butter pudding on the hall floor, to trail my skirts over in passing. I am quite certain you would have upset the whole thing."

She was clearly not to be caught at a disadvantage; but before he had time to answer, the door opened, and a tall, fair, handsome man entered unannounced.

"Sir Maurice Adair!" she exclaimed. "Why, I thought you were to dine and sleep at the Chamberlaynes'."

"And I am come to dine and sleep here; that is all the difference—having, I believe, offered up at your shrine the dearest offering man can make—the wind of my favourite horse."

"When you have sufficiently recovered your manners to greet Mr. Hepburn with proper respect, you had better try, and make yourself intelligible. Do you know Sir Maurice Adair, Mr. Hepburn?"

The minister thought a passing expression of surprise crossed the young man's face ; but he greeted him with perfect courtesy.

"Now explain what you mean," said Lady Ellinor.

"I reached that wretched tree, and found your carriage on the other side. Stevens was nearly beside himself, declaring you would have to walk all the way home. I found it would be still some little time before the road would be clear, so I turned, and drove as though dear life hung upon the pace. I arrived just about ten minutes after you did.

"I believe you are an imposter. Where have you been all the time since ?"

"At the stables. I left my man at home. I knew the Chamberlaynes were terribly overcrowded ; so I drove straight up to the stables. I have been looking at the horses."

Then General Farquharson came in, and James Hepburn closely watched the meeting of the two men. The name of Sir Maurice Adair had not been wanting among those straws of scandal upon which he had chanced, and he felt more in his own element in watching the proceedings of men than when those of women were in question. The manner of both was certainly frank, cordial, and without any symptom of restraint ; and Sir Maurice was so outspoken in his declaration that profound devotion to Lady Ellinor had prompted his action, that the minister said to himself—

"They may be playing with fire, but there is no singeing as yet."

He did observe that Sir Maurice rose to leave the dining-room after dinner very soon after Lady Ellinor had left the room. But then General Farquharson only smiled, and said :

"Off, as usual, to bear Lady Ellinor company ?"

"I should think so," answered the young man. "You don't suppose I am going to sit here and drink wine when I can sit in the drawing-room and talk to her."

"Get your confidences over soon, for we shall not be long after you. We'll talk very loud as we cross the hall, so that you may have warning to change the subject."

"Thank you. I'll listen."

It all seemed harmless enough, but Mr. Hepburn's ears were sharp; and later in the evening, while he and General Farquharson were playing a game of chess, he heard Sir Maurice say in a low tone—

"Too bad, I lost my chance to-day."

"Came to the ground, in fact, between two stools."

"Not the least. There was no attraction at Danescourt."

"Well, better luck next time."

"Oh, yes, and when will that be? As if that was any consolation, either. Much consolation it would be if one had lost one's dinner, and was very hungry, to be promised one should dine at the next Lord Mayor's dinner. I know someone I should uncommonly like to horsewhip."

"Hush!"

"Checkmate," said General Farquharson, "you were not attending to your game, Mr. Hepburn. That last move was a terrible mistake."

"I ought to apologize. My thoughts had wandered for a moment; and I think it is growing late. May I have my dogcart brought round?"

Then after a few words to Lady Ellinor about her promised visit on the morrow, he took his leave, fain to admit that luxury, wholly devoid of the ostentation with which, in his experience, it had been too often associated, and linked with quiet refinement, and perfect harmony of all surroundings, had something very attractive in it.

CHAPTER V.

MUSCULAR CHRISTIANITY.

AS Mr. Hepburn passed out of the grounds of Strathellon, the boy who had come out to open the lodge gate called after him—

“The back of the cairt’s doun, sir. Will I fasten it up?”

“No, thank you,” he replied, looking back, “the catch is loose, it would soon fall again. There is nothing in the cart, so it does not matter.”

The night was heavily clouded, but the moon being near the full, and the weather dry, there was quite light enough for Mr. Hepburn to see the white line of road stretching along before him, even where—as was the case for some distance after he passed out of the lodge—the road ran through a wood. His pony, moreover, was sure-footed, and clever at night work, so his attention was sufficiently unoccupied to let him devote his thoughts to any subject which he chose. They turned naturally, and with some anxiety, to Lady Ellinor Farquharson. Both she and Sir Maurice Adair were playing with fire, there could be no doubt about that. For how long would they continue to do so without baleful results? A certain biting definiteness seemed to be given to various hints and innuendoes which he had heard in Mossgiel, by what he had observed that evening. His reflections on the subject were not, however, of long duration. They were abruptly cut short by his pony throwing up his head with a violent start, and making a sudden spring forward, a most unusual freak in that demure animal. At the same moment a total shifting of the balance of the

cart, warned Mr. Hepburn of some heavy accession of weight behind. He glanced over his shoulder, then dropped his reins, and faced completely round. A man had sprung on to the back of the cart, was grasping the rail with his left hand, to steady himself, while in the other, he held a pistol, which was aimed at the minister's head. The muzzle was not many inches distant from his face as he turned.

The sudden spring of the pony probably saved his master's life. It threw the miscreant off his balance for a moment, and ere he could recover it his chance was gone, Whether it be creditable, or the reverse, to a minister, to be qualified to deliver, straight from the shoulder, a blow which would not disgrace a prize-fighter, and whether, possessing the ability, any circumstances can justify its use, far be it from me to determine. Canons of clerical behaviour have not been formulated with a view to the special circumstance of having a loaded pistol levelled at your head. Be that as it may, James Hepburn did possess the ability, and he forthwith promptly and effectually made use of it. He planted a blow between his assailant's eyes, which would have felled an ox; and as he hastily turned to catch up his reins again he heard the heavy thud with which the man dropped upon the road, and the report of the pistol as he fell.

The startled pony had broken into a gallop, and it was some few minutes ere Mr. Hepburn could recover control of him sufficiently to pull him up. Then he paused to consider what must be his next step. The hour was late, and the road little frequented at night; still it was quite possible some heavy vehicle might at any moment come along it. It was impossible to leave even a would-be murderer lying insensible, under the circumstances, in the very middle of the way; to say nothing of the chance he might have received himself the pistol bullet he had intended for the minister.

But then, on the other hand, the man might have accomplices, whom the report of the pistol would bring to the spot, in which case to return would be a risk, almost a certainty, of being murdered, without the least benefit to anyone. The minister sat listening intently for a few moments, but not the faintest sound broke the stillness. At last he got out of his dogcart, and taking hold of the pony's head, cautiously walked back along the road until, as he expected, he found his assailant, lying exactly in the centre of it, with the pistol on the ground close to him.

Mr. Hepburn bent down and looked closely in the man's face. Then he started back with a slight exclamation of surprise. The features, not yet wholly unrecognisable, were those of Robert Blackwood, pretty Mary Warrender's questionable suitor.

What could be the meaning of this strange occurrence? The man was no common footpad, likely to be lying in wait for any suitable prey, and there was not a shadow of ill-feeling between him and the minister. Their intercourse had been of the very slightest possible kind. Mr. Hepburn did not remember to have even seen him more than twice or three times, for a few moments, and barely half-a-dozen ordinarily civil remarks had ever passed between them. A strong suspicion began to shape itself in his mind, and after fastening the pony to a convenient tree, and possessing himself of the pistol, which had another barrel loaded, he took the still unconscious man by the shoulders, and dragging him to the side of the road, propped him up against a bank. In a few moments he began to recover himself, and opening his eyes, stared about in a half dazed manner.

"Blackwood," said the minister, sharply, "what does all this mean?"

"What does all what mean? Who are you?"

"I don't think you need to ask that question. It's no use your fencing."

Blackwood raised himself a little, and stared up at the speaker, with an unmistakeably puzzled look. "Mr. Hepburn," he said at last, "how the devil did you come here?"

There was genuine amazement in the tone. "As I thought," said the minister to himself, "a case of mistaken identity. I wonder whose life I have saved to-night?"

"I came here in my dogcart," he said aloud, "and was near going away in a different fashion. Blackwood, whose blood were you minded to stain your soul with to-night?"

"Not yours, at any rate. It was all a cursed mistake. I never dreamed—— Minister, ye mistook your callin'. Ye were meant for a prize-fighter. My word, but ye can hit, and, God be thankit, ye did too, and in gude time. I wadna hae yer bluid on my hands for something. Gie us a haun up, an' I'll mak' for hame. Eh, man, but ye've dirl'd my heid for me. I doubt I'll no be able to see much longer."

"Nonsense, man," replied the minister, "you can't go home. Why, you can scarce stand steady. Your eyes will be closed up fast, long before you get home. A pistol barrel within an inch of a man's face doesn't incline him to hit softly, I can tell you. Get into my cart."

"Na, na, I'll nae trouble ye, I'll manage to win hame some gait."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," replied Mr. Hepburn, quietly but firmly. "You've tried to commit murder to-night, remember. You must stand the consequences. Your pistol is in my pocket, and I have marked you pretty well for identification. If you do not do exactly what I order you to do, I shall drive straight to the police station and give notice what has happened."

"I'll no say but ye've got it in your mind to tak' me straight there the noo," replied the man.

"I have saved you to-night, involuntarily, from the guilt of murder, Blackwood. Thank God, for your sake, I have saved both myself and some one else. Do you think I would frustrate all the good I hope may come to you from this, by handing you over to all the indelible disgrace and ruinous associations of penal servitude? No, my brother. To seek, and, if it may be, to save that which is lost, is my office; not to bring upon men the regulated revenge called justice."

"Weel, ye're a gey different sort o' minister frae ony I ever ken't. But ye maun hae yer will. I doubt I'll no be able to see ava in a wee bit."

Mr. Hepburn aided him into the dogcart, and took his place beside him. Then as they drove rapidly towards the town, he said—

"Your face may chance to bring questions upon us, Blackwood. We must both tell the same story, and without any apparent hesitation. I knocked you down as I was driving along the road, just where the shadow of the wood is deep. You admit the fault was entirely your own, and that clears me. Refuse to give any particulars on account of the darkness of the night."

"A' richt, sir. But ye maun get some one to tak' me hame frae the manse, unless ye wad be at the trouble o' driving me hame. I'd no' be able to find the way."

"You're not going home to-night. You'll stay at the manse."

"Oh no, sir."

"Yes, you will. You're my prisoner, remember. I want the whole thing kept quiet if I can manage it. I don't want to have to go about telling half truths, which are not much

better than lies, when they're meant to deceive. You'll just stay quietly at the manse, and I'll go down to-morrow and get your brother to come, after dusk, and walk home with you. If that unlucky pistol shot does not betray us, we may, in that way, keep the whole affair in the dark altogether."

"I'll swear, truly enough, sir, I heard nae pistol shot," Blackwood said.

"And I could honestly say I heard it, but did not see it fired. But I would far rather not be forced to say anything about it."

They drove on in silence, until they reached the manse, where, as the minister had hoped might be the case, all was dark and silent. It was an understood thing that no one waited for him, if he was late, and on this special occasion he deemed the arrangement particularly satisfactory. He was by no means certain that the discovery of his intention to domicile her enemy within the very bounds of her haven of refuge, might not have roused Mrs. Findlay to wailing and remonstrance audible enough to attract the notice of some light sleeper, with one ear open for sounds of interest floating upon the night air.

"Get down," he said to Blackwood, as soon as he was on the pavement himself. "The pony will stand quietly enough. I'll see you into the house before I take him into the stable."

He guided his almost helpless companion's steps into the house, then struck a light, and leading him into a sitting room, placed him in an easy chair.

"Every one is in bed," he said, "so just sit quiet here. I'll be back in a few moments."

When Mr. Hepburn returned, after delivering his pony safely into his man's charge, Blackwood was sitting just as he

had left him, with his head rested on his hand. Mr. Hepburn took up the candle, and closely inspected his face.

"You'll be a queer object for some days," he quietly remarked; "but you have come off better than I expected. Fortunately for you, you were too lightly balanced to get the full force of the blow. It was no gentle one."

"You've nae need tae tell me that, sir. If I'd got it fair, I doubt I'd hae had a fractured skull. I've a sair heid the noo, I can tell ye."

"You must get to bed. Are you hungry?"

"No, sir, I'm no hungry, but I'm awfu' thirsty."

"You had better have a little weak brandy and water. While you drink it, I'll try and find some cooling lotion for your face, and arrange some place for you to sleep."

As soon as he had made his arrangements, he returned to the sitting room and led his unexpected guest upstairs. After seeing him safely deposited on the bed, and well supplied with a cooling lotion, he said—

"I am going to lock you in, Blackwood. If you should hear any one try the door, don't speak. It would frighten Mrs. Findlay nearly into a fit if she chanced to come in and find you here. She would not have the faintest idea who you are. I'll come to you early. Good-night."

"Gude nicht, an' thank ye, sir; ye're owre gude to me, Mr. Hepburn. If I'd murdered ye on the road the nicht, it wad hae gane sair wi' me to get ower it. But if I'd done it, kennin' what ye are, as I do the noo, I think I wad hae blawn my ain brains oct."

"God be praised you were saved from the guilt of shedding blood, Blackwood. But if you had killed me, and the shock had won you from an evil life to a better one than you had ever led, the result would have been worth the cost."

"Eh, minister, I doubt ye canna honestly say that."

"I shouldn't say it all if I couldn't. When you know me a little better you'll know I'm not given to saying things because they are the right things for a minister to say."

"Ye're no like ony minister I ever heard of. Ye've the hardest fist and the kindest heart o' ony man I ever kent."

"You've a good deal to learn yet before you've done with being surprised. Good-night again;" and with these words Mr. Hepburn left the room.

He did not go to bed. He felt too restless and excited to have any inclination for sleep, so seating himself by his bedroom fire, he gave himself up to meditation over the strange events of the day. The morning when he had hurried from a hasty breakfast to visit the injured collier, seemed very far away. Within the space of a few hours he had been introduced to a hitherto wholly unknown social circle, and had very narrowly escaped being murdered. Certainly not a normal experience in any man's life. According to all precedent, James Hepburn ought to have been mainly occupied in offering up devout thanksgiving for an almost miraculous preservation from instant death, and in all that minute self-examination whereby the seriously-inclined mind is supposed, under the circumstances, to improve the occasion. But, in truth, he was in no way thus occupied. Firstly, his thoughts were not in general prone to take a subjective turn; and, secondly, an attitude of devout thankfulness for an escape from instant and painless entrance into that life beyond the grave, whose exceeding and eternal weight of glory it was the special aim and object of his calling to hold up before the gaze of burdened, groaning humanity, as the sure and abundant reward of him who should endure to the end, would have struck him as a painful incongruity—a proof of a wide and fatal gulf yawning

between personal and professional sentiment. Most devout thanksgiving was in his heart, if not actually on his lips, but it was for the quick eye and powerful arm which had saved an erring soul that night from blood-guiltiness, in more than intent, and given him, he hoped, a chance to influence it for good. His whole thoughts, as he sat, went forth with anxious yearning towards the three human beings with whom the day's events had brought him in contact, who so sorely needed every aid which could be given to tide them over the shoals and quicksands of this mortal life.

Sir Maurice Adair had not impressed him unfavourably on the whole. He judged him to be by no means a mere selfish, heartless, profligate, bent on gratifying any passing fancy, regardless of any amount of ruin and suffering inflicted; rather a man in whom a total absence of all moral discipline had too thoroughly weakened moral force to allow much hope of successful resistance of any strongly aroused inclination. And what was the extent of his temptation? If he himself, the minister, habituated from early youth to constant self-discipline, and by all the circumstances and habits of his life in an immeasurably safer position, had felt something of the extreme fascination of Lady Ellinor Farquharson's grace and beauty, what must be the peril to Sir Maurice Adair? And Lady Ellinor herself? He could hardly bear to picture to himself even the possibility that she might be induced to sully her fair fame, to give up all that could assure to her life lasting peace and happiness, for the sake of a flame of fevered passion, which must inevitably perish ere long, and leave behind it only a scorched, blackened waste, in which its fiery breath had dried up every source of pure and abiding joy. And whatever might be the state of feeling between her and her husband, that momentary flash of bitterness had betrayed that there was

something in their relations not so entirely satisfactory as to preclude all chance of the devotion of such a man as Sir Maurice Adair proving dangerous to her.

His thoughts, however, of both Lady Ellinor and Sir Maurice, though sad and anxious, were somewhat desultory and purposeless. It seemed little likely that either would ever come within the sphere of his personal influence. His prisoner guest was a much more immediate cause for perplexed meditation. The Blackwoods bore, and he had seen quite enough to know that they merited it, a bad name; but he would never have expected to hear even the worst of them, at least of the sons, charged with premeditated murder. If there had been any shadow of truth in the dark whispers about the unfortunate mother, her husband alone was in fault. And Robert Blackwood was far from being the worst—he was unquestionable the least objectionable of the four brothers. It could not be some poaching quarrel that was in question. He would not have so confidently expected to find one of General Farquharson's gamekeepers in a man driving a dog-cart along the road at that time of night, that he would have sprung thus at him without a moment's scrutiny. Some darker mystery must lie behind the transaction. Whosoever the object of Robert Blackwood's intended vengeance might be, it was clearly some one whom he expected to be driving, and to be the only person driving along that road at that moment. Was it possible to find any clue in that fact? The minister pondered long over it, but he pondered in vain; and at last, after listening for a moment at the neighbouring door, and satisfying himself by Blackwood's heavy regular breathing that he had fallen asleep, Mr. Hepburn threw himself, dressed as he was, on his bed, and slumbered in fitful snatches until the morning. Then he had to face the indignant con-

sternation of Mrs. Findlay, when she heard who was in the house.

"Eh, sirs; but what did ye bring him here for? Siccan a ne'er do-weel as yon in a minister's hoose."

"If there were no ne'er-do-wells in the world, there would be no need of ministers, Mrs. Findlay, so perhaps he is not so ill-placed after all. However, I should not have thought it fair to bring him here deliberately without warning you, because of Mary. But under the circumstances I had no alternative, and he is not going to stay. I am going down shortly to get his brother to come as soon as it is dark, and walk home with him. I doubt Master Robert was after no good, so he'll keep quiet enough about the whole business."

"I'm sure I hope he will, sir," replied Mrs. Findlay, whose ideas about the decorous respectability befitting a minister's house were not to be thus suddenly metamorphosed. "There'll be an awfu' scandal in the place if this gets wind."

"See that you don't let it out, then. And now take Blackwood some breakfast."

After a hasty visit to his patient, and ascertaining that his face was in a better condition than he had dared to hope, Mr. Hepburn set out in search of the delinquent's brother. He asked no questions in the house. He knew the Blackwoods well enough to know that no power on earth would draw any information out of them, even had it been in their power to give it.

He took his patient some soup about two o'clock, and told him his brother would be there as soon as it was dark.

"Ye're awfu' gude to me, sir," the man replied. "I don't deserve it o' ye."

"Will you make me a recompense then, Blackwood?" he asked.

"What is it, sir? If it's aught I can do, I'll be right glad."

"Will you tell me frankly, as your friend and your minister, whose life you were seeking, and why?"

He shook his head. "I canna tell ye that, sir."

"Why not? Are you afraid I shall denounce you?"

"Devil a bit. Ye're no ane o' that sort. But I ken richt weel ye'd try to keep the man oot o' harm's way."

"And why should that matter?"

"Because I mean to hae his blood yet."

"Blackwood! Are you so dead to all moral sense that you can still cling to your wicked purpose, when the very hand of God himself has interposed to hold you back from the guilt of shedding blood?"

"I do haud to it, Mr. Hepburn. I'll mak' no professions. He has injured me, an' I'll no rest till I hae dune for him."

"And if a man has injured you, what can the worst injury be to that you do yourself when you stain your soul with the guilt of murder? Trust me, Blackwood, the pleasure of gratified revenge does not last ten minutes after a man has seen his victim fall. And then begins that life-long agony of blood-guiltiness, which has driven many and many a man to confess and expiate his crime, rather than drag on a miserable existence under the curse of that awful consciousness. Because a man has done you a wrong, will you give him the chance of being the cause of that unutterable wretchedness to you?"

It was but a counterfeit virtue he was urging upon him, and he knew it—rectitude for the sake of self. But what then? Where would be the use of endeavouring to plant amid the noxious growths flourishing in the evil soil of that sin-darkened soul the pure seed of a lofty Christian morality? The more robust plant of a sort of selfish rectitude

might chance to fight its way into life, and in some measure improve the soil, and fit it for the gradual development of more fragile sensitive virtues.

His listener shook his head impatiently. "I'll no gie in tae that, sir. If ye'd been the coward at heart that maist men are, ye'd hae left me lying on the road, an' gane straucht off, tremblin' and shakin', to the police. Then maybe they'd hae gien me seven years for merely haein' gien ye a sair fricht oot o' a mistake. The law wad do that, but it wadna aid me to strike at the man wha's dune me a war injury by far; sae I maun jist tak' the law into my ain hands. Why wad I be mair troubled about it afterwards than the hangman? If a' ye say is true, why wad he no be miserable?"

The minister made no reply. He began to pace thoughtfully up and down the room. A heritage of intemperance and disease, resulting in totally warped moral instincts, united with considerable mental shrewdness—that was, in brief, his diagnosis. But the treatment? He had studied deeply. Few ministers had ever, he knew, devoted themselves more earnestly and unweariedly to the task of fitting themselves for their holy duties; yet here he found himself at a loss the first time he was called upon to deal with a somewhat unusual phase of moral perversion. It was a humiliating perception; but a more immediate perplexity claimed his thoughts for the moment. How was he to act? Was he justified in turning loose upon the world this man, admitting his immovable resolve to murder some one? Would not a certain weight of blood-guiltiness rest upon his own head if some unsuspecting victim perished? Yet how could he in any way interpose, save by denouncing the attempt upon himself? That very perception brought him a sense of relief. He had, quite irresponsibly, by merely

acting upon the dictates of the purest humanity, placed himself in a position in which any action was impossible. To give up now to justice the man from whom, by persuading him to trust himself in his hands, he had irrevocably cut off all chance of escape, would be an act of treachery from which every honourable mind must revolt. He had no alternative but to bear the burden of this terrible knowledge, strive his utmost to influence the man, and endeavour to watch him to the best of his ability, in the hope that some happy accident might give him the knowledge necessary to enable him to frustrate the evil purpose.

Blackwood, out of the one eye he could use a little, had been watching him curiously "I doubt ye dinna kin what to say to that, minister," he said at last.

Mr. Hepburn came and sat down beside him. "You are quite right there, Blackwood. I do not know what to say to you. Your whole moral perceptions are so distorted that I might as well expect a man who had something pressing on his eyeball to see physical objects clearly, as expect you to take a right view of any moral question. How far you are responsible for that state of things God only knows; but I confess I don't know where to begin with you."

"Maybe ye may spare yersel' the trouble o' beginnin anywhere. It's only some, ye ken, that are elected to everlasting life. I doubt I'll be ane o' them that wae left to perish in the estate o' sin and misery; so it canna mak' muckle odds what I do."

"If you think I shall argue that point with you, Blackwood, you are quite mistaken. You are only giving fresh proof of the perverted moral state I imputed to you. It is useless to put sound moral arguments before a man who has

no power to grasp them. I candidly confess I don't know how to deal with you. I can only say, if you ever do succeed in murdering the man you hate, I shall feel that I know at least one instance where it was a mistake to strive to rescue a man from the consequences of his own doings."

"There's ane question I wad fain ask ye aboot that, sir. When ye were sae gleg to come back and pick me up, did ye no think I might hae accomplices?"

"I did think of it, and I listened for a moment. But under any circumstances I could not leave you lying there unconscious, wounded for aught I knew, to take the chance of being run over, if any one came along the road."

Blackwood gave a perceptible start. "Had ye ony cause to think ony one was comin?" he asked with evident interest.

"None whatever. But it was of course quite possible, What made you ask?"

"Oh, naethin'. But I'm thinkin', sir, ye're better than the gude Samaritan. The man he tended was only his enemy in a general sort o' way. He hadna just tried to put a bullet in his heid."

"And how comes it that you can admire the beauty of his action, and yet hold to your purpose of taking a cruel revenge yourself?"

"There's nae parallel between the cases, sir. If I saw a man that was an enemy o' mine, in a general sort o' a way, lyin' wounded on a road, I dinna think I'd be slow to gie him a helpin' hand. To punish a man that's dune me a great wrong is a clean different sort o' a thing."

"You'll come to see in a different light some day, Blackwood; and God grant it may be ere it is too late. It will be a cruel sting planted in my life if I should come to know

I have only saved my life, and yours, in order to doom some other man to a violent, and you to a shameful death, or the murderer's brand for life."

With a heavy heart James Hepburn wished his prisoner good-bye when dusk came, and his musings were sad and troubled that night. Had the churches really no message for these lost sheep? Was their message only for the prosperous, decent, well-living classes, whose transgressions were mainly of a negative order? Blackwood had more religious knowledge than he had supposed, but he gave little heed to his adroit use of a theological position. That was all mere fence, a reminiscence probably of some piece of chance reading, brought forward in a spirit of mischief. But where and how was an assault to be made upon the impregnable position of a total perversion of all moral sense, where self had a stake in the question? The minister had gathered experience in the course of his discussion. Small wonder that the argument for rectitude for the sake of self had failed of its effect. Rectitude, even generosity, objectively, Blackwood seemed well enough able both to understand; but rectitude, subjectively, meant to him just that course which selfish considerations, pure and simple, dictated.

And why had he, the minister, felt himself thus powerless to grapple with the case? Was it his misfortune, or his fault? Or was he drifting helplessly in the direction of a blank admission that the worst phases of moral evil must be handed over to physical science for treatment? Innumerable aspects of the question came crowding into his thoughts, producing so much mental confusion, as they jostled one another in hopeless confusion, that at last, by dint of a vigorous effort of will, he threw aside the whole subject for the time, and sought the rest which the ex-

citement of the last eight and forty hours had rendered him sorely in need.

Yet, for all his despondent musings and dispiriting sense of failure, he had made, in that brief space of time, a deeper impression on a hardened nature than anything had ever made upon it before. But not by anything he had said in the way of deliberate remonstrance. That went, in Blackwood's reckoning, to the score of professional talk. From the moment when the man's returning consciousness was sufficiently clear to let him think connectedly, he had pondered almost unceasingly over the minister's conduct; and when he put the question about returning to his aid, more hung on the answer than Mr. Hepburn suspected. The least particle of "professional talk" would have ruined everything. A word about the soul of a sinful brother, or about the duty of a Christian minister over-riding all other considerations, and Blackwood would have set it all down to the score of a good heavy sum to your credit in your account with Heaven. But the honest straightforward reply, the unconscious betrayal of self being so completely in the background, that not even a perception of the possible danger involved could weigh for a moment against the impulse to insure the personal safety of a helpless, unconscious, fellow-creature, and that fellow-creature one who, but for a prompt display of manly courage, would have been his rescuer's murderer, struck him with a sense of amazement and admiring respect he had never felt for any man before. "Ministers are aye fond o' preachin'," Blackwood had been given to asserting; "but when it comes to practisin', I dinna see they're ony way vera different from ither folk." That assertion would never be made again without a mental reservation. James Hepburn thought too little about himself for it ever to occur to him his action

had been heroic ; but he had manifested genuine pluck, the darling virtue of every true Briton. If he had found a way to influence a hardened offender, it must be admitted he had opened it up with the blow which, the recipient himself said, would have factured his skull had he received its full force.

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CHAPTER VI.

SERIOUS MISGIVINGS.

LADY ELLINOR FARQUHARSON'S pony carriage was at Mrs. Tweedie's door by eleven o'clock, on the morning of the day following Mr. Hepburn's strange adventure. Mrs. Tweedie had been herself to visit the sufferer the previous afternoon. Dr. Tweedie had of course heard of the accident, and his wife, not being so heavily weighted with social responsibilities as Mrs. Watson, had found time to go at once to the house, and see what could be done; so she was well prepared to give Lady Ellinor all necessary information.

"I am sure it is very kind of you," she said, "to interest yourself so much in them."

"Now, my dear Mrs. Tweedie, don't you start off on that tack, and try and make me out an angel of impossible goodness, because I am not palpably a monster of callous heartlessness. The wife of one of our keepers has no children of her own. She will take charge of the children for a time. The sooner they can be moved the better. Could we not go at once and see about it?"

"But my dear Lady Ellinor, it is such a low dirty place. It really is not fit for you to go there. Let me settle it for you."

"You go there; why should not I go?"

"Oh, because—because—well it is so different. Your carriage could really hardly get down to the place."

"My carriage isn't going. It can go and wait at the hotel till it is wanted. You don't suppose I am going to

flaunt in these poor creatures' very faces a luxury which costs, I dare say, more than many a poor fellow has to maintain a wife and children upon?"

"Oh, we'll go directly, if you wish it," replied Mrs. Tweedie, a little taken aback. "Only remember you must not expect to find the comfortable quarters you have been used to when you visit some of your own retainers. I'll go and put on my bonnet at once." And she walked up stairs, saying to herself as she went, "I only hope she won't turn hysterical when she finds what the place is really like."

The injured collier and his wife lived in a squalid, poverty-stricken street, in the low part of the town, which had nothing to redeem its dismal dirty aspect save a view in the distance of the open sea, with the sunshine sparkling on the rippling waves, and the sweep of the fresh sea breeze up its close confines; circumstances sufficiently accounting for the sturdy healthy appearance of the majority of the ragged children swarming over the pavement. Mrs. Tweedie very soon began to perceive that she need be under no apprehensions respecting her companion's nerves. Lady Ellinor threaded her way among the children and the dogs, and all other obstructions, dead or living, with as much calm unconcern as if she had been strolling about the well kept grounds at Strathellon.

Neither in the presence of all the suffering and distress which she had come to seek did her tact fail her. Mrs. Tweedie, standing quietly in the back ground, ready to intervene in the character of moral drag, should Lady Ellinor's enthusiasm carry her beyond all bounds of reason, watched the scene with no little interest. Even the injured man smiled faintly as the beautiful face bent over him, with a few gentle words of kindly sympathy and cheering hopefulness; and the poor pale harassed woman was very

soon pouring forth her troubles to the spoilt child of fortune, with a freedom and evident confidence of sympathy which seemed a little curious under the circumstances. Lady Ellinor's proposition of taking away the children she hailed with tearful gratitude.

"Eh, mem, if ye wad do that, I wad be gratefu' to ye indeed. Mrs. Lorrimer was for me to gang to the infirmary mysel'. But hoo could I gang an' leave Jamie the noo? If I canna rise mysel', I can see that ither folk see richtly to him."

"Of course you cannot go away. It was a very stupid proposal. You will be much better and happier at home. But the children must go at once. Don't you think you could have them ready this afternoon?"

"Eh, mem, I hae nae the time to see their bit claes. It's nae vera muckle the puir wee things hae, ony way."

"Oh, never mind the clothes. We can find something for them. Don't you think," and she turned to Mrs. Tweedie, "you could manage to arrange to get them sent over this afternoon?"

"I am sure we could. I'll go, presently, and speak to Mr. Hepburn about it."

"Oh, if ye ask Mr. Hepburn, he'll do onything. I never see'd the like o' him. I think, when Jamie was brocht hame, I wad hae gaen clean oot o' my mind, had it no been for his comin' in. An' he wad hae come and stappit the nicht had it no been for the way I am in, an' he said he wad likely be mair in the road than ony use. I wunner he hasna been in the morn. He was ower yonner, but he seemed in a hurry like, an' he didna stap. I'm thinkin' there's some trouble ower there, mem," she added, especially addressing Mrs. Tweedie.

"Where?"

"Ower at the Blackwood's. Rob gaed oot last nicht, I

saw him mysel', just on to the darkenin', an' he's ne'er come hame. They dinna say muckle. they're aye gey close ye ken; but they're terrible put aboot, onybody can see that. I doubt it wad be something aboot that that took Mr. Hepburn there. Likely Rob's been oot poachin', an' got into trouble."

"Poaching," said Lady Ellinor. "Are they poachers?"

"Oh, no, mem, not to say regular poachers. But they're people no weel likit, an' folk do say they lend a han' to mony a doubtful business, whiles."

"If the man was out poaching last night, and has never come home," said Lady Ellinor, turning to Mrs. Tweedie, "some enquiry should be set on foot at once. I heard General Farquharson say this morning the keepers had heard a shot in the night, somewhere not very far from the lodge. He may have wounded himself accidentally, and not be able to move."

"Oh, not very likely, I should think," replied Mrs. Tweedie, with a sort of instinctive wish Lady Ellinor had kept that piece of information to herself. "The Blackwoods are a roving race, and very well able to take care of themselves. I don't doubt he'll come back safe enough."

"If that unlucky pistol shot does not betray us," Mr. Hepburn had said the previous evening. And, while he was vainly seeking some means whereby to deal with the problem of that utter moral perversion which confused all Blackwood's perceptions of right or wrong, where his own private feelings came strongly into play, through the apparently wildly improbable mediumship of Lady Ellinor Farquharson, the news had been set afloat in the low parts of Mossiel that Blackwood's unexplained absence was coincident with an unaccountable shot, heard somewhere in the neighbourhood of Strathellon.

No fairly intelligent human being, conversant with the ways of country towns, will for a moment suppose that the more aristocratic quarter of Mossgiel long remained ignorant of the fact that Lady Ellinor Farquharson had driven early to Mrs. Tweedie's house, and had walked with her to visit the injured collier. The intelligence really gave poor Mrs. Watson a severe shock, when her nurse brought it home, after the younger children's morning walk, and caused her, as well, genuine vexation. In the anguish caused by her social disaster, she had, as Mr. Hepburn had dimly foreboded, forgotten all about her promise, and she was really a kind-hearted woman when the original soil was fairly struck through the superincumbent rubbish.

"Why did you not remind me, Annie?" she said, irritably, to her eldest daughter, a lively young damsel of some fifteen years of age, when the early dinner was in progress. "You were in the room, and heard Mr. Hepburn tell me all about it."

"I never thought anything more about it, mamma; I hadn't time, I had to dress for the dancing class, and I don't know how many things to do besides. But how did Lady Ellinor Farquharson hear about it, I wonder?"

"Oh, the Tweedies, of course. Mrs. Tweedie makes a great phrase about never having sought Lady Ellinor's acquaintance; but I must say I think she takes care not to lose an opportunity of cultivating it. The idea of taking a giddy fashionable woman like her to such a place as that. It is really too absurd!" Then, under pressure of her annoyances, she could not resist the temptation to hurl a small stone. "If Mrs. Tweedie had daughters," she added in an undertone to the governess, who was sitting close to her, "she might perhaps not be quite so eager to cultivate her aristocratic acquaintance." And the governess compressed

her lips, and shook her head with an air of much significance.

Somewhat late in the afternoon Mrs. Watson set off to fulfil her forgotten promise, really anxious to do what she could, but still suffering a little mortification at feeling herself, and on this occasion by her own fault, thrust into the second place. To have been first in the field where one of the Lorrimer's own hands was in question, would have seemed a trifling amend for her unmerited humiliation. It would have been very pleasant to talk about it. "One of Mr. Lorrimer's colliers you know, a very sad case. We have done all we possibly can for them, and I think we shall tide them over the trouble." That was a lost opportunity, but still she was minded to do her best.

Naturally her first instinct was closely to question Mrs. Thompson, the injured man's wife, respecting Lady Ellinor Farquharson's visit. What had she said? What had she done? "Held" her pocket handkerchief to her nose and gave you a sovereign, I suppose?"

"Indeed, mem, she did naethin' o' the kind. - She just sat her doun and talkit like she nicht hae been ane o' oorselves. There's nae pride about her. An' if she showed her pocket napkin ava, it was because the tears cam' in her beautiful eyes when I tauld her a' the trouble we'd had this some time. An' a' the weans are to gang awa this vera nicht, to ane o' the keeper's houses to stap for a while. Lady Ellinor Farquharson's a guid frien' to a pair body, whatever."

"But how did she hear any thing about you?" asked Mrs. Watson, perceiving it prudent to tack. "I suppose Mrs. Tweedie told her."

"Na, men, I dinna think it was Mrs. Tweedie, though she cam wi' her. - I'm no vera sure, but I doubt it was Mr. Hepburn tauld her."

"Mr. Hepburn! Impossible. He does not know Lady Ellinor Farquharson."

"Oh, but he does, mem. There was somethin' she said, I dinna just mind what it was at the moment, but I do mind she said somethin', an' said Mr. Hepburn had tauld her."

Here was news with a vengeance! The minister sufficiently well acquainted with Lady Ellinor to interest her in a case of distress, and not a single member of his congregation aware that they had ever even met! This looked very like intentional concealment. Mrs. Watson had by no means forgotten Mr. Laing's vile insinuations about the spell of Lady Ellinor's beauty. She did not like Mr. Laing. She strongly suspected him of making jokes over her social vampire, but as an unincumbered male, gifted with considerable conversational powers, he was too useful to be dispensed with. There seemed a sort of oblique thrust at him in giving emphasis to a possibility of some sort of scandal nourished out of his remarks. She was silently revolving the matter, when Mrs. Thompson broke in with her great piece of news, which had thriven healthily since the morning.

"Ye'll have heard about the Blackwoods, mem?"

"No, I've heard nothing. What's wrong?" It seemed natural to conclude anything about the Blackwoods must be something wrong. "I hope Blackwood hasn't broken out again. Mr. Watson was saying, only the other day, how steady he'd been for some time."

"Na, mem. I ken naught aboot Blackwood himsel'. It's Rob. There's somethin' gey wrang. He's nae been hame syne yestreen, an' there's nae twa ways about it, they're gey sair troubled. Maggie was oot every ten minutes frae the break o' day, lookin' up an' doon the street till nigh on to ten o'clock. Then Mr. Hepburn cam', and syne then they seem quiet enouch. But Rob's nae turned up, for a' they

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tell any one what speers for him, that they ken a' about him, an' he'll be hame the nicht. But I told Mrs. Tweedie, and Leddy Ellinor said the keepers had heard a shot in the middle o' the nicht; an' ane o' the keepers was ower there, just afore ye cam' down the street. Folk a' think Rob's gotten himself into some trouble, an' that Mr. Hepburn kens something about it. But how wad Mr. Hepburn ken onything o' Rob's goin's on in the nicht, and shots in the Strathellon woods?"

"Ah. How indeed? But very unaccountable things happen sometimes," replied Mrs. Watson, with some emphasis. Then, after leaving some solid aid for the present emergency, she took her departure. "This looks serious, really very serious," she said to herself, as she walked up the street again, with a sternly uncompromising sense of moral rectitude rapidly increasing upon her, as it is always apt to do when someone's defalcations in that respect, real or imaginary, have involved some personal annoyance to ourselves. What could be the meaning of all these strange proceedings? Only so far back as the previous day, Mr. Hepburn had claimed her good offices for the suffering family, on the ground of their absolute destitution. And here, before, as she put it herself, she had time to intervene, he had brought Lady Ellinor Farquharson into the field, ready, as it seemed, to undertake the maintenance of the whole family. It was really making a fool of her. But that was not the most serious part of the business. Why had he never mentioned Lady Ellinor; never hinted at any intention of appealing to her? And why had he kept so very close the fact of his having any acquaintance with her? And how should he come to be mixed up with Robert Blackwood, and mysterious midnight shots in Strathellon woods. Mrs. Watson really felt herself to be on the very

brink of mental contemplation of such appalling possibilities that she had not courage to follow the train of thought any further. She only resolved that she would at once institute searching inquiries as to whether any one, prior to that day, had been aware that Mr. Hepburn had made acquaintance with Lady Ellinor Farquharson.

Her resolution to follow her train of portentous speculation no further was here ended by an unexpected incident. The evening had quite closed in, and she was hastening homeward, walking so fast, that, at a corner, she very nearly ran against two men, who were about to turn down the street from which she emerged. One she recognised at once as Tom Blackwood, an elder brother of the missing Robert. But the other; he was a good deal muffled up, and his hat was drawn down over his face, but it was surely Robert himself. She turned and looked after him. Yes. There was no doubt it was he. She knew them all well, and had not a doubt of his identity. The missing black sheep was actually found then, so it really did seem probable that Mr. Hepburn had had some knowledge of his whereabouts. She forthwith determined to call at the Blackwoods the next day. She was in the habit of visiting occasionally among the factory hands, regarding it as a religious duty, and probably not admitting to herself that it was one rendered certainly not less agreeable by the deference naturally shewn towards the manager's wife. She administered reproof, exhortation, and commendation, with extreme impartiality, just according as action presented itself in the light of her own prejudices, euphemistically styled her judgment and experience, and was not universally popular. Rumour even said that her approach, if perceived in time, was sometimes a signal for locking of doors, and silent waiting in retired corners, until she was safely afar; the recording angel hav-

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ing much subsequent work provided for him in noting down mendacious expressions of regret at such unfortunate absences from home.

She set forth on her self-imposed mission the next morning as soon as her household duties were discharged. The something "gey queer" at the Blackwoods; the connection between that something and Mr. Hepburn; his mysterious acquaintance with Lady Ellinor Farquharson; and the personal slight put upon herself, were all floating about in her mind, as facts sufficiently vaguely formulated to allow of their being run separately or collectively into any mould which accident might shape out in her mind for their reception. She felt quite satisfied respecting her duty in the matter. As wife of one of the leading Free Church elders, and of the manager of the factory, it was clearly binding upon her thoroughly to investigate suspicious occurrences connected with the minister of the church and a foreman of the factory.

The house occupied by the Blackwoods was in all respects so superior to the low class tenements which surrounded it, as to suggest that the family lived in such a neighbourhood from some other cause than necessity. Maggie Blackwood, a girl of about twenty years of age, handsome like all her brothers, but wearing an habitual expression of half-sullen haughty reserve, received the manager's wife with cold civility. Mrs. Watson was not, however, a person to be thus daunted. Without any circumlocution she dashed into her subject, concealing, however, with what she considered great astuteness, the fact of her being aware that the culprit had come to light.

"What's all this I hear about Rob, Maggie?"

"I wad say ye'er mair likely to ken that yersel', mem, than I am."

"Now, Maggie, don't be impertinent."

"I'm no wishin' to be impertinent, mem. But hoo wad I possibly ken what ye have heard?"

"Why, of course, I've heard what every one knows, that Rob went out the night before last and has never come home."

"Everyone kens mair than I ken, then. Rob's in the hoose the noo."

"Oh, he has come back then? But he was away all the night. He wasn't home till late in the afternoon."

"An' what then?" retorted the girl with a sort of sullen fire in her eyes. "Is it ony sin for a man to be awa frae hame for twenty-four hours? I wunner what ye'd say yersel', Mrs. Watson, if some one cam' speerin' an' pryin' because Mr. Watson had been awa for a night, just as if it was a crime."

"I should order any such person out of the house," replied Mrs. Watson with more candour than caution; "but this is quite a different case. You were expecting Rob home, and there was an unexplained shot in the Strathellon woods. What was Mr. Hepburn down here so early about? and what was General Farquharson's keeper doing here? It all looks very suspicious, and you know very well, Maggie, your brothers are by no means above suspicion. Mr. Watson cannot allow this sort of thing among the factory hands; we must have some sort of explanation."

"Rob's no a factory hand," answered the girl, angrily. But before she had time to add anything more, or Mrs. Watson to put forth an inverted theological dogma about the sins of children being visitable upon their parents, the door of an inner room, which had been only partially closed during the discussion was opened, and Robert Blackwood himself, recognisable now as far as features went, but of

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many-tinted complexion, stood before Mrs. Watson. He had heard the whole colloquy, and was shrewd enough to perceive that his wisest course, under the circumstances, was to assume perfect indifference about the whole matter. He was also astute enough, however, to leave the enemy to make the first move, and stood silent, looking at the visitor with a certain grim amusement.

"Bless me, Robert Blackwood!" she exclaimed, a little taken aback at his appearance and manner, "is that you?"

"Ay, mem, it's just me. You seemed so desperate interested about me, I thocht maybe it wad relieve yer anxiety to see for yersel' that I'm here a' safe. I'm no a very bonnie sight, I doubt, but ye'll maybe look over that."

"But what has happened?"

"I just chanced to get in Mr. Hepburn's way when he was drivin' in the dark, an' got knocked ower. It was not his fault ava, but he was sair pit aboot, an' wad hae me to gang hame wi' him an' stap the nicht at the manse. My face was a gay sicht war yesterday than it is the noo, sae I'd nae mind to walk through the streets, an' I just stappit at the manse till the darkenin'."

"Mr. Hepburn knocked you down! But how did that happen?"

"Weel, mem, I doubt ye'll ne'er hae been alane on a road in a dark nicht, or ye'd ken it's easier dune than ye'd think."

"What time was it?"

"I don't mind what time exactly. It was in the evenin'."

"And where?"

"On the Strathellon road."

"The Strathellon road! Why, what was Mr. Hepburn doing there?"

"Indeed, mem, I canna tell ye. I wadna be sae ill bred, ye ken, as to gang speerin' into 'ither folks' business."

Mrs. Watson changed colour slightly, but she only sharply retorted—

“And what were you doing, Blackwood?”

“I was just speerin’ for some one I was gey anxious to hae a word wi’, an’ thocht wad be comin’ along that road. That was hoo I got in the way.”

“And this shot? I suppose that was what the keeper was here about. Did you hear it?”

“No, mem. I heard nae shot.”

“Did Mr. Hepburn?”

“I never askit him. Deed after sic a crack on the heid, I can tell ye a man’s nae gleg at askin’ questions. I’m no vera sure I richtly kent whar I was, or what had happened, till after I was inside the manse.”

“Did Mr. Hepburn say nothing about where he had been?” was the question Mrs. Watson was longing to ask, but the remembrance of Blackwood’s last thrust withheld her. Disappointment and irritation combined, naturally found vent in good advice. “Really, I must say, Blackwood,” she said, “the whole story is most unsatisfactory, and I’m sure I hope you’ll take warning by it. You might have been actually killed outright; and it never looks well for a man to be wandering about in that way at night. It is really almost fortunate you had that accident, for there has evidently been some poaching going on, and you might have been suspected and got into trouble. See what it is to have such a character as lays you open to suspicion! Mr. Watson would really be forced to take serious measures if any of the hands were accused of poaching, so I hope you’ll be more careful in future.”

This lucid and logical intermixture of warning and exhortation was received by Robert Blackwood in a sullen silence. which was a common refuge of all the Blackwoods when

circumstances were not to their liking; and as the temporary condition of his face was not such as to render its expression easy of interpretation, Mrs. Watson was left in uncertainty as to what effect her judicious observations might have made.

She carried away with her a greatly increased sense of the grave and alarming aspect of circumstances. Robert Blackwood's manner had certainly not been satisfactory, but then the Blackwoods never were satisfactory, especially to an inquiring mind bent upon investigating their private affairs, so perhaps there was not much in that. The extreme gravity of the case lay in the fact that Mr. Hepburn, at some unknown hour of the night, was driving his dog-cart along the road to Strathellon. That road, after passing the entrance to Strathellon, gradually became little more than a mere cart track, leading only to a few scattered cottages, and finally losing itself on a wide tract of moorland. There was no room for any reasonable supposition other than that the minister was either going to, or returning from Strathellon. This in itself would have been grave indication of worldliness; but when all the gossip of the neighbourhood, vaguely formulated under the elastic phrase "all we know about Lady Ellinor," was taken into account, it really contained dark suggestions of much more terrible import. She was so completely wrapt up in her meditations, that she nearly ran over Mrs. Haigg without seeing her.

"You are early abroad Mrs. Watson. Have you been to the Thompsons'?"

"Not to-day. I saw them yesterday."

"Oh well, I suppose one need not trouble one's self about them now. They'll be quite independent of our small efforts. Turtle soup and champagne, I should think. Mrs. Tweedie will be quite a popular person if she brings Lady Ellinor

Farquharson into the town in this way. Whether she'll improve the morals of the place is another thing."

"It wasn't Mrs Tweedie, it was Mr. Hepburn."

"Mr. Hepburn! My dear Mrs. Watson, he does not know Lady Ellinor. Only three days ago, I heard him say, at Mrs. Jardine's, that he had never seen her, save at a distance, on horseback or driving."

"Really! Well I was told it was he," replied Mrs. Watson, with a sudden access of caution. Appearances were growing more and more serious, and she was not going to allow Mrs. Haigg to get possession of her trump card. It was more than very, it was awfully serious, for how was it possible to escape the conviction that that assertion was a downright lie; and if so, it must have been told with a purpose. Could things really have gone so far? she questioned with herself as she walked on. Then, as though darkly prophesying to some sympathetic listener, she muttered half aloud—"Mark my words. That will prove a most disastrous acquaintance. I"——

She really experienced quite a severe shock. A turn in the road brought her, just at that moment, in full view of the Free Church manse. Before the door was standing Lady Ellinor Farquharson's pony carriage, and down the small strip of garden in front of the house were slowly walking, evidently in deep discussion, Lady Ellinor herself, and Mr. Hepburn; he hatless, evidently escorting her to her carriage.

Mrs. Watson gave a gasp, and stopped dead. The culpable couple stood for a moment talking on the pavement. Then Lady Ellinor got into her carriage, and as she took the reins, Mr. Hepburn wrapped the rug round her, and his manner in Mrs. Watson's eyes, was so marked by unbecoming familiarity, that her indignation was strongly aroused.

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He received in turn, as the ponies moved, a smile which brought strongly to Mrs. Watson's mind Mr. Laing's abominable assertions. Mr. Hepburn walked slowly back into the house. Lady Ellinor passed close to Mrs. Watson, who fixed upon her the medusa-like glare of the virtuous British matron, deeming that still lingering smile a false and deceitful thing—one of the wiles of a very syren. She reached home almost in a state of mental collapse, the result of the violent fermentation of her horror, indignation, and outraged morality.

Some ten minutes before Mrs. Watson's appalling discovery, Mrs. Tweedie, stopping to exchange a few words with Mr. Laing, had had her attention called to the pony carriage, standing at the manse gate.

"Will you take my wager now?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Mr. Hepburn is not made of such inflammable material. But I entirely retract my award to you of a gold medal."

"Why?"

"Because had I foreseen their ever making any acquaintance, I would rather you had bitten your tongue off than set all those women's backs up as you did."

"Hang the fellow! Serves him right. He deserves to get torn to pieces. Would she come and visit me in that way? It's quite abominable the advantages ministers and doctors have. It's only fair they should pay for them. I have a great mind to go and tell Mrs. Haigg, that through the window I distinctly saw him kiss her. Do you think she would believe it?"

"I am quite sure she would repeat it."

CHAPTER VII.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL PUZZLE.

MR. HEPBURN'S mental condition, as he walked slowly back into the house, after seeing Lady Ellinor Farquharson to the carriage, was wholly free from any sinful elation or malicious gratification in glancing at envying rivals. The short space of time which had elapsed since Robert Blackwood had left the manse with his brother had been quite sufficient for a considerable increase of the minister's anxious perplexity. The bare consciousness of the man being wholly at large, with a murderous intent against some one developed within him, was in itself a heavy mental burden. Could he only have been assured that the object of Blackwood's enmity was aware of its existence, he would have felt somewhat relieved, for the man's homicidal tendencies were clearly not of an impartially general character, and Mr. Hepburn felt very sure the narrow escape he had had of committing an irretrievable blunder would render him more cautious for the future. But this was, after all, a watery gleam of consolation, more than counterbalanced by a graver aspect of the question brought under his notice that very morning.

Mrs. Findlay, on hearing the previous morning who was temporary domiciled under the same roof as her turtle dove, had acted with crafty promptness. She had forthwith granted her pretty niece a holiday, and despatched her without loss of time to spend the day with a friend. Mary Warrender had set out in total unconsciousness of the

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events of the night, and had not returned until some time after Rob Blackwood had left the house.

It was Mr. Hepburn's practice, immediately after his breakfast, to retire to his study for two or three hours hard reading before giving himself up to the more desultory occupations of a minister's time. On the morning after Blackwood's departure, he had not been many minutes in his study, when there came a light tap at the door, followed by the entrance of Mary Warrender, wearing a slightly embarrassed air.

"Please, sir, can I speak to ye?"

"Certainly. What's the matter? Have you been lighting the fire with some of my manuscripts?"

"Oh no, sir. I wanted to ask you about—about Rob Blackwood."

Mr. Hepburn gave a slight start, and looked at the girl, as she stood colouring a little, and twisting a corner of her apron around her finger, with more attention than he had ever bestowed on her before. She was certainly very pretty; but not on the whole a damsel from whom unfailing prudence and staid sobriety of demeanour might be confidently expected. There was nothing low, nothing sinister looking about her. But she looked as if she might be giddy, and possibly an adept in the arts of flirtation.

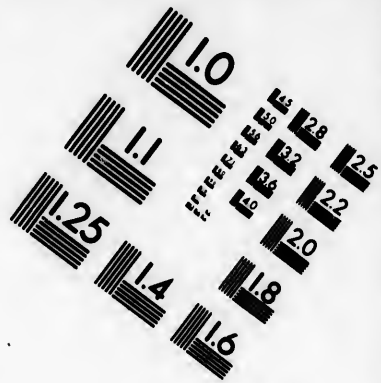
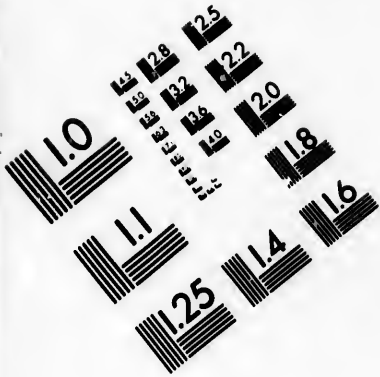
"What about Blackwood?" asked the minister, after a moment's scrutiny.

"There was some accident, an' ye ken somethin' about it, sir. I ken Rob was here through the night."

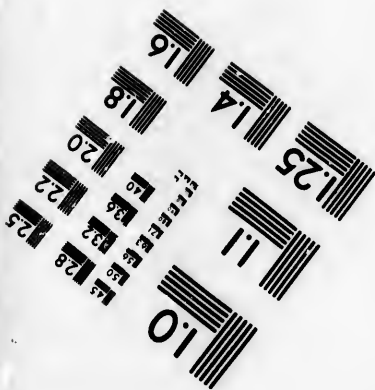
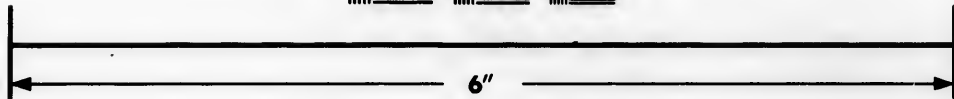
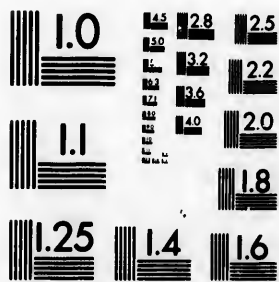
"Who told you anything about it?"

She shifted her position a little. "Weel, sir, ye ken Maggie an' I were aye frien's. But my aunt canna thole the Blackwoods, sae I've nae often a chance to see her. I just took the opportunity to gang roun' an' see her yester-





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day, and I heard somethin' o't there ; but nae just exactly what had happened."

Mr. Hepburn had been standing by his writing table while she spoke. He did not at once reply. When he did he merely said, "sit down," seating himself at the same time in his writing chair.

Mary Warrender obeyed. Still Mr. Hepburn did not speak for some few moments. Then fixing his keen penetrating glance upon her, he asked—

"Do you intend to marry Robert Blackwood, Mary!"

The girl gave her head a slight but significant toss. "I canna just say," she replied. "I'm no a'thegither sure."

"But he wants you to marry him?"

"Oh yes. He's been botherin' me to promise him this year past an' mair."

"And why don't you give him a decided answer?"

"That's no sae easy dune. I like Rob weel eneuch. But he doesna stick steady to onything. I've nae mind to marry a man that's aye shiftin' aboot, sae as one wad ne'er ken if one's hoose was one's ain for six months. That's no a comfortable way o' livin'. I tell't Rob plain eneuch I wadna mak' up my mind till I see'd him settle steady to somethin'. An' Rob says he'll no settle to onything till he's sure I mean to tak' him, so there it just stands."

Mr. Hepburn smiled. Mrs. Findlay's anxiety appeared to be a trifle overdone. Mary Warrender seemed to be at least when marriage was in question, what the world would call a very prudent girl ; that is, one not in the least likely to relegate self too much to the background.

"Do you think that is quite fair?" he asked.

"How, sir?"

"You are demanding from Blackwood that he shall do a certain thing, with a view to gain a certain object. Yet

you refuse to pledge yourself that he shall thereby gain that object. I mean" he added, seeing that she looked a little puzzled, "that I think you ought either to refuse Blackwood at once, or promise that you will marry him on condition that he settles steadily down to some occupation. You cannot expect him to act in a certain way, in order to win you for his wife, while he remains quite uncertain whether, in the end, you will even then marry him."

"Oh, but there's mair to think about than that. Bob's awfu' jealous. I've no great mind to a jealous husband. I've a cousin married to a jealous husband, an' she's an awfu' time o't whiles. Bob an' I hae had words about it afore now. I'll no say but he's got some notion in his heid the noo. He's been gey short in the temper for some time, and looked unco dour whiles."

Mr. Hepburn gave her a keen look. Had he unexpectedly lighted upon a clue, to guide him at least in the right direction in which to seek a solution of his burdensome enigma? Jealousy was likely enough to be a most potent arouser of all the worst passions of Robert Blackwood's sullen revengeful nature. This frivolous coquettish damsel might chance to turn out a more important person than she appeared. He contemplated her with almost cynical amusement for a moment. Was it possible that that trim, neat little personage, with her bright, fresh, almost childlike face, was in reality the cause of his having so narrowly escaped being murdered?

"Have you ever given Blackwood any cause for jealousy?" he asked.

"I've never gi'en him ony right to be jealous, so he's no business to concern himself wi' what I do," she replied, somewhat pertly.

"Don't speak in that flippant way, girl," said the minis-

ter sternly. "Robert Blackwood is not a man whose jealousy it is at all safe to play with. You may be the cause of more mischief than you have any idea of. Tell me honestly, at once, if you know of any special person, whom he is jealous of now?"

"No, indeed I don't, sir," replied the girl, a little frightened at his manner. "Rob wadna be satisfied wi' onything short o' my never sayin' a word to ony young fellow save himsel', an' he's whiles savage about one, whiles about anither; but I dinna ken o' ony special person he's suspicious about."

"Well, Mary," said Mr. Hepburn, gravely, "it is pretty clear how the case stands with you. Your vanity is flattered by having a fine handsome fellow like Robert Blackwood hanging about after you, and you like to show your power and keep him dangling about without committing yourself. Now I tell you you are acting very wrongly, and mind you, in a way involving no small danger to yourself. Blackwood is just the sort of man whom jealousy would be likely to drive to some desperate act, and you might quite as likely be the victim of it yourself, as any man he fancied you favoured. Either promise him at once that if he will settle down quietly, and keep steady to something for a certain time, you will marry him at the end of that time, or refuse him definitely at once. Your present way of acting is heartless and unprincipled. If evil comes of it to you, you will have drawn it on yourself. If it falls upon some one else, the guilt will mainly rest upon your head. Suppose Blackwood murdered some man in a fit of jealous rage and was hung for it, how would you like to live, all your life, with the blood of two men lying at your door?"

The girl turned pale. "Lord, sir," she exclaimed, "Rob wad ne'er gang sae far as that."

"How can you tell? It is not to be supposed a mere child like you can understand what men feel; but at any rate you can read. You must know how often the papers report cases of murder, caused solely by jealousy, and, remember, it is not unfrequently the woman herself is the victim. Go now, and think well over what I have said. I shall tell you nothing about Blackwood. While you continue to trifle in this way you have no right to ask any questions. There is only one thing more. If you would diminish the risk of very serious evil, do not fail, should you see any cause to suspect Blackwood is jealous of any particular person, to let me know at once who it is."

Mary retired, looking very pale and subdued, but the minister felt his morning's reading was rendered hopeless for that day. The danger, or the clearness of the perception of it seemed gravely increased by what he had heard. "Just the man," he muttered to himself, "to try and make away with a dreaded rival." And the hypothesis fitted in well with Blackwood's own remarks, about injuries which no law would help him to avenge. But who was that supposed rival? He was quite certain Mary had been speaking truthfully when she said she had no idea herself; but she was not a remarkably sagacious damsel. Nothing was more likely than that Blackwood, if he really suspected any special rival, would carefully conceal that fact from her, with a view of watching, unsuspected, what went on. And if such were the case, the girl might really, in all innocence, feed a flame of which she was wholly unaware. He began almost to wish that he was habitually a little less impatient of gossip. Had he quaffed more freely of the perennial founts of the same always overflowing in every corner of Mossiel, he might have found out now, that he had been swallowing draughts of useful knowledge un-

awares. As long as we are compelled, whether we will or not, to have dealings with evil and foolish people, it is by no means safe wholly to ignore what evil and foolish people say.

About this point in his reflection came another tap at the door. This time it was Mrs. Findlay, bristling in every line of face and figure with unexpressed protests against the minister's doings, and charged with a message. Adam Blackwood had just looked in to say his brother Robert would greatly like to speak to Mr. Hepburn, and as his face was still much swollen, hoped the minister would not take it amiss if he asked him to look in and see him in the course of the afternoon.

The thread of his musings thus cut short, Mr. Hepburn did try to betake himself to study; but he found no satisfaction that day in Spinoza, Renan, or any other heretical abomination, and it was a positive relief to him when Lady Ellinor Farquharson was announced.

"I am on my way to Mrs. Tweedie's," she said, "with a few things needed for poor Thomson. But I want to know about that man who was missing. I think his name is Blackwood. Has he been heard of?"

"Blackwood—What do you know about him?" asked Mr. Hepburn, somewhat startled.

"I heard about him at Thomson's, that he had been out all night, and they seemed to think you knew something. One of our keepers had heard a shot in the night, and we were rather uneasy, so General Farquharson sent a man to ask yesterday, but they were barely civil, and would tell him nothing. The keepers have been looking along the road, and they say something heavy has been dragged across it, and there is some confusion of wheel marks, so we are getting quite excited. Do you know anything about the matter?"

"A good deal too much," replied Mr. Hepburn; and then he told her so much of his adventure as the circumstances rendered necessary.

"Strange he should have been walking about with a loaded pistol about him," she said thoughtfully, "in a peaceful orderly country like this."

"The Blackwoods do not bear a very good character," he replied, his whole soul revolting the while against the verbally accurate misleader. "They may well have enemies where other people would fear none. Pray tell General Farquharson the facts when you go home, and put a stop to all further questioning. It is sure to breed bad feeling in a gossiping place like this."

This being the tenor of Mr. Hepburn's conversation with Lady Ellinor Farquharson, it may well be imagined that her fascinations were not the uppermost thought in his mind as he walked back into the manse, to prepare for a still more distasteful interview with Blackwood himself.

"I hope ye'll excuse my askin' ye to come here, sir," Blackwood said, with more show of respect in manner than he was apt to assume towards any one. "I'm no verra fit to be seen yet. No that it matters muckle the noo. We're no gaun to keep this business quiet, ye see, sir. I doubt ye dinna ken Mossgiel sae weel as I do, or ye'd no hae thocht o' sic a thing."

"The shot was heard it seems."

"Yes, an' ane o' the keepers was speerin' afore I cam' doun. An' Mrs. Watson's been here the day, in a fine takin'. I had to tell her just what we settled. She's a body that doesna miss aught she'd fain ken, for want o' down right speerin', an' she's sair concerned to find oot what ye were doin' on the Strathellon road at that time o' nicht. I wad'na say, but she thinks minister's like young leddies, sud na be oot after the darkenin'."

Mr. Hepburn did not immediately reply. He sat silent, knitting his brows a little, but he was not thinking of Mrs. Watson. He was questioning with himself whether it might be possible to turn Blackwood's flank by a sudden attack, to win some incautious admission from him, by a pointed and direct question. But he decided against the attempt. The Blackwood face was a perfect mask. Save by the lowering gloom which marked dissatisfaction of any kind, it never betrayed anything. His best course was to leave the man wholly ignorant of the fact that he entertained the most remote wish to find out anything about the matter. Blackwood sat watching him observantly. At last he said—

"I'm sair vexed about it, sir. I wish it had been onybody but yersel. Though it's ill sayin' that, for if it had, I wad hae been in gaol the noo."

"Why should you be vexed?"

"Weel, sir, I ken weel eneuch, to get mixed up ony gait wi' a ne'er-do weel lot like us, is no what a minister likes."

"You are quite wrong then. Ne'er-do-weels are just the class with whom ministers ought to be most constantly mixed up. But, Blackwood, why in the world should you be ne'er-do weels? Fine intelligent fellows like you and your brothers, who have had good schooling, have no excuse for sinking down in that way."

"We've no chance o' aught else, sir. Hae ye no heard tell about my mother?"

The minister looked at him in surprise. Had he been taking a dip into the subject of heredity? "Your mother?" he repeated.

"Ay, sir. I doubt ye've no been sae lang in Mossgiel wi'oot hearin' hoo it's mair than suspected we made awa wi' her."

"Yes, of course I have heard that."

"An' believed it?"

"How could I either believe, or disbelieve? I know nothing about it."

"Ye're the first person I ever cared sud know the real truth, sir. I was but a lad at the time. It's six years past the noo. The way o't was this. A gomeril that lived down by the beach then took it into his heid he could mak' money wi' a bathin' machine, an' he set ane up. Mother took up wi' it maist tremendously. She was aye gien to takin' violent fancies about things, and then nothin' wad turn her. She and my father had words about the expense, mair than once. One day she was gaein' down when father met her on the beach. I doubt he'd been drinkin', though he was na fair aff his heid; but drink aye made him quarrelsome. They had a terrible quarrel on the beach; gettin' excited aye gave her a chance o' ane o' they fits, an' she went on, an' had ane in the water, an' was drowned. Father had come up ragin' and sayin', it wad be a gude thing if she never cam' oot, an' some folk aboot had heard them quarrelling, sae it was ower the town, in no time, she'd been murdered, and we've been a doomed lot since. A minister like you, sir, wha's aye been respectit, doesna ken how easy it mak's it to be a blackguard an' a rascal, the kennin' that everyone believes ye're one."

"It makes it still easier to excuse youself from trying to be anything else, and I suspect you have been making use of it that way. When have you ever made an honest fight against the prejudice? Until you have done that, and been worsted, don't try that shallow artifice of shifting your own responsibilities on to society."

"Ye hit as hard wi' yer tongue, as wi' yer tist, Mr. Hepburn, but ye're no like a minister ava. Ye sud hae begun talkin' about prayer, and the grace o' God."

“So I might, and I might have recited a few verses of the New Testament in Greek, and the one would have been as much use to you as the other. Only that in the one case you would have known you had not the faintest perception of the meaning. In the other you would not have known it. But what made you anxious I should know the truth about your mother?”

“Because I wad like ye no to think war o’ us than need be. But there was mair than that I wanted to say to ye.

Maybe ye’ll no believe it, when I winna promise just what ye wad like, but I wad fain do somethin’ to show ye I’m no ungrateful for yer kindness.”

“That’s easy enough. You’ll repay me amply for far more than I have done for you, if you will lift off me the burden of the knowledge that I am in some measure responsible for your being at large, with a deliberate intention of murdering some one.”

“Killin’s no always murder, sir. An’ that was what was in my mind. I’ll make’ nae promise, but if I pit myself oot o’ the way o’ carrin’ it through, it wad come to pretty near the same. I’ve frien’s oot in New Zealand. I’d gang straucht oot there, if Mary Warrender wad marry me, and gang wi’ me. If ye could manage to bring that about, ye wad hae gained yer end.”

Then she was at the bottom of this tangle. “I had some talk with her about you this morning,” Mr. Hepburn replied. “She asked after you. You and she seem to me to have both a considerable aptitude for looking at the question of marriage from a purely selfish point of view. I told her she ought either to refuse you finally at once, or promise she would marry you on condition that you settled steadily to something, an’ held to it for any stipulated time. But you can surely scarcely credit I would lend my

self to any such scheme as you suggest. If she asked my advice, it would be to break off all acquaintance with you. You are not a man I would recommend any woman to marry; and as for advising a girl like her, a mere child, to place herself in the power of a man who is at the moment giving proof of utterly distorted moral preceptions, and go off with him to a distant country—the very suggestion is monstrous.”

Blackwood's brow lowered. “Ye're no blate o' speaking yer mind, sir,” he said.

“Certainly I am not. I don't expect you to be able to take a clear and correct view of any question which touches yourself; otherwise I should say the suggestion you have made is simply an insult.”

“I didn't mean it so.”

“I know you didn't. You can't see anything correctly in which you are personally concerned. But if you are so determinedly bent on getting Mary Warrender to marry you, does it not occur to you that to commit murder is not the most likely way to accomplish your end?”

“If she means to marry any one, it will hae to be me. She'll marry no one else.”

“I doubt you won't be consulted.”

“Will I not? Mary'll be my wife, or no one's wife. Ye may tak' yer aith o' that.”

“How old are you, Blackwood?”

“Twenty-two past, sir.”

“And Mary Warrender is about eighteen. You have both time enough to wait. Arrange to go out to New Zealand at once. I'll help you if you like; and I will urge Mary to promise you that if you keep steady and prove you have lived quietly and respectably for three years, she will marry you then, unless she chooses to break off with

you altogether. Then you would be free to marry some one else."

The Blackwood scowl had settled down on Robert's face.

"Mary'll gang wi' me the noo, or I'll no gang awa," he replied sullenly.

Knowing it was useless to attempt anything in that mood, Mr. Hepburn left him. So pretty, coquettish Mary Warrender was the "she" in this case. But was it with or without reason? She made the former very probable—he, the latter. He judged it far from impossible that her positive declaration, that she did not know who was the special object of his jealousy, might be more correctly read with "which" substituted for "who."

He returned home thoughtful and anxious walking with a grave, abstracted air, and was keenly scrutinized by Mrs. Haigg and Miss Muir, who were sitting together at the drawing-room window of the latter lady, which commanded a full view of the manse.

"Our minister looks very sad and solemn to-day, don't you think?" remarked Mrs. Haigg. "He is not so much elated as one might expect after having the honour of a visit from Lady Ellinor Farquharson.

"Oh, but then he has been visiting his dear friends the Blackwoods since, perhaps that is less inspiriting. I was at the Thomsons' this afternoon. He crossed from their house to the Blackwoods just as I went down the street. I sat with Thomson for some time. He had not come out of the Blackwoods when I left, so it was a long visit. They are strange people for a minister to make so much of."

"Oh, my dear, don't you see, he is trying to convert Robert, after knocking him down, and nearly killing him; which is of course the exact truth of that business."

"Oh, of course," replied Miss Muir. "But really people

who don't see very well at night should take some one to drive them, when they are out after dark."

"Why? You don't mean."

"I mean just what I say. Some people's sight is not good at night, you know."

"Dear, dear, I never thought of such a thing. Really, how deceptive appearances are."

"Yes, my dear, especially at night."

Then the tea tray came in, and the conversation was changed.

CHAPTER VIII.

OVER DISCIPLINED.

MARY WARRENDER was still looking very grave and subdued when she brought in dinner that evening, and after she had cleared the table, she still stood hesitating in the room.

"Please sir," she began at last. Then she paused.

"Well, what is it?" asked the minister, looking up from his book.

"Ye said I was to tell ye, if I thought o' ony one."

"Yes. Has your memory improved since the morning?" he asked, with a touch of grim sarcasm. He did not feel specially drawn towards this flighty damsel, who had—all unwittingly—brought such sore trouble upon him.

"I've been thinkin', sir; an' I canna but think it'll be some one about Strathellon."

"Ha!" exclaimed the minister, with more show of interest, as the remembrance flashed across him of Blackwood's sudden change of manner, when he asked whether Mr. Hepburn had any reason to expect anyone would be coming along the road. "What makes you think so?"

"Weel, sir, ye ken there was a gran' servants' ball at Strathellon last Christmas, afore ye cam' to Mossiel, an' aunt an' me was asked. Aunt was housemaid there lang-ayne, in auld Mr. Farquharson's time. It was a gran' ball. There was a sicht o' people there; an' Rob was there; an' I dinna think he's aye been quite like himsel' since then. He was aye wantin' to ken, if I'd been oot, whar I'd been;

an' I mind once I'd been for a walk wi' my cousin's wife—awa' through the woods along the river bank—an' when he speered whar I'd been, just for mischief, I tauld him, an' didna say she was wi' me, an' he gave me an awfu-like luke, siccan a glower, I ne'er seed the like—I was fair frichted that day."

"And do you mean to say you've no idea who he is jealous of, Mary? Can you remember any one at the ball?—any one you danced with very often, for instance?"

"No, sir, I canna, indeed. I didna want for partners," she added, with a slight toss of her head. "I hadna muckle chance to dance often wi' the same partner. But I am sure Rob's ne'er been quite the same since; sae I thought I'd just tell ye. I am sure I dinna want to do ony harm to ony one."

"You did quite right to tell me. But take my advice, Mary—either break off at once with Blackwood, or give him some definite answer."

Mary retired, not looking, Mr. Hepburn thought, quite as though she relished this last piece of advice. "She is a thorough paced flirt," he said to himself, "and can't make up her mind to let a handsome lover go. Heaven grant she mayn't pay a dear price for her folly."

In the course of a night not blessed with very sound slumber, he resolved that the next day he would go and see General Farquharson's head-keeper, and enlighten him so far as might ensure it becoming known about Strathellon that Robert Blackwood was not a man whose jealousy it was safe to excite. It might chance, in that way, that the object of the man's intended vengeance might be indirectly warned.

In the grounds, however, he met General Farquharson himself.

"Ah, Mr. Hepburn," he said, "glad to see you. Were you coming to enliven us with a visit? A nice sort of a minister you are, driving over Her Majesty's lieges in the dark. The loaded pistol is an ugly feature in the case though. Don't you think so?"

"Unquestionably, and uglier perhaps indirectly than directly. The Blackwoods may well have their own reasons for going about armed; but it is a dangerous practice. I was on my way to speak to your head-keeper, for I have picked up some information which makes me fear there are special dangers attending the circumstance of Robert Blackwood roaming about with loaded pistols in his possession. But as you are at home, I should like if you are disengaged, to tell you what I have heard."

"By all means;" and he led the way to the library. There Mr. Hepburn told so much of his tale as it suited him to tell.

"You will see my reason for grave anxiety," he said, in conclusion. "The father is a confirmed drunkard—the mother was epileptic. Under such circumstances one must expect the possibility of violent and uncontrollable impulses. I believe his devotion to the girl is sincere. Were he some day, when thus armed, to meet some object of thoroughly aroused jealousy, I would not be answerable for the consequence. Even unarmed he would be dangerous, for he is a powerful man."

"You are quite right," replied General Farquharson. "I have known such cases. He would be extremely likely to murder some object of suspicion, under some sudden impulse. But I cannot think at the moment of any likely object here. In fact, our establishment is, I should say, almost too new. It was only last summer that Lady Ellinor and I settled down here. The place had been shut up for some time pre-

viously. However, I will speak to Johnstone ; he is a cautious, sensible man, and will be very likely to get at more than either you or I shall. If he can find out anything, I will let you know. It is the youngest brother, Robert, you say ?”

“ Yes.”

“ It is certainly strange he should be prowling about with loaded pistols. I should have been less surprised had it been one of the others. I have heard Johnstone speak of them, and say he believed the youngest was the only one who was not a confirmed poacher. I allowed him to be asked to the servants' ball last Christmas, the only one of the brothers who was. Are you going ?” he asked as Mr. Hepburn rose. “ Will you not wait till Lady Ellinor comes in ? I believe she is out riding.”

“ Not to-day, thank you. I have several visits to pay.”

After Mr. Hepburn was gone, General Farquharson resigned himself to serious meditation. He was much disturbed by what he had heard ; but his thoughts went off in an entirely unsuggested direction. Two young brothers of Lady Ellinor had been staying a good deal at Strathellon, as well as sundry cousins of his own. Could one or more of them have been poaching, after the fashion in which the rich man, without any great sense of culpability, is occasionally apt to repay the enormous crime of the poor man's raids on his pheasants, and have thus succeeded in arousing such a dangerous hostility ? This possibility gave the matter a very grave aspect in his eyes. He was an honourable, kindly natured man, but had been well fitted into his groove ; and a danger which might threaten a man moving in his own sphere of life certainly seemed to him a far more serious affair than one only concerning some gamekeeper, or other retainer.

Some half hour after Mr. Hepburn's departure he saw Lady Ellinor's horse pass the window on the way to the stables, and he forthwith went slowly upstairs to her boudoir. The room was empty, but tea was waiting.

"Is that you Stuart?" said Lady Ellinor's voice through the half closed curtains of her dressing-room. "I will be with you in a few minutes."

General Farquharson walked up to the fire-place, and standing with his back to it took a leisurely survey of the room, not without a certain expression of anxiety on his face. He was by no means insensible to the fact that a middle aged man, who takes to himself a young and very beautiful wife, accepts responsibilities which would be wanting were his age nearer to her own. But unfortunately his consciousness of the bare fact was far more clear than his judgment as to how to deal with it was sound. To surround her with every possible luxury, to accord to her the most absolute liberty of action, and to leave no wish of hers unfulfilled which it was in his power to gratify, was his constant study. It was not in him to treat any woman otherwise than with chivalrous courtesy, and to his wife his demeanour was simply chivalrously courteous, with some little infusion of an affection which might have been paternal, fraternal, anything in fact save conjugal. He had marked out for himself, clearly and distinctly, the line of conduct which he held to be the fitting one for a man much older than a very beautiful wife, and in that line of conduct he had never failed, never would fail. If it failed of the results he anticipated, he would only blame himself for not carrying it out more efficiently, and would steadily persevere in trying to insure his wife's happiness, after the method which he judged to be the right one, at the cost of any amount of personal sacrifice.

Lady Ellinor had not been offered up a struggling victim on the altar of Mammon. Her mother had not sufficient of the maternal heroism so often brilliantly manifested in society, for such a sacrifice. She had been equal to pointing out with much force and clearness the advantages of the marriage, and had then left her daughter to make her own decision, only rejoicing when the girl showed herself capable of subordinating romance to good sense ; the which, with her temperament, she certainly never would have done, but for the accidental circumstance that she never really loved any one. In that fact lay the strength and the weakness, the safety and the danger, of the situation. She had nothing to struggle with, and resolutely battle down, in her relations to her husband ; but she had neither a past to protect her from, nor experience to give her quickness in reading the signs of coming perils should they arise. A vague indefinable sense of disappointment had begun to steal over her soon after her marriage. General Farquharson was so invariably the model husband ; so patient if she was petulant or unreasonable ; so very close on patient, too, when her youthful spirits led her into gaiety and frolic ; so tenderly solicitous if she was indisposed, or out of spirits ; but withal so calm and carefully correct that his very goodness irritated her occasionally to a degree which caused her generous nature the deepest remorse. On one occasion, some unexpected act of thoughtful kindness on his part, coming upon her suddenly in the midst of one of these fits of remorse, so wrought upon her that she threw herself into his arms with a burst of tears ; whereupon he gently but hastily disengaged himself from her embrace, expressed the most affectionate dread that she had over-fatigued herself, and insisted upon placing her on a sofa and ringing for her maid to attend to her. Lady Ellinor had never again indulged in

any such manifestations, but the whole two years of her married life had been taken up in constantly impressing upon herself what an excellent husband General Farquharson was, and how dearly she ought to love him; and in bitterly upbraiding herself for the deficiency in that respect of which she was keenly conscious. That momentary flash of bitterness about the ponies, and her instant contrition, were but an outward manifestation of processes perpetually going on in her own mind. Certainly, as the minister had divined, with but slight knowledge of the facts, the position was not one to render constant association with such a man as Sir Maurice Adair absolutely devoid of danger.

General Farquharson, as he sat glancing over the room was meditating whether there was not something which might be provided to increase its luxurious comfort. It seemed as if it would be impossible to suggest additions; but might not some alterations be effected which would gratify Lady Ellinor? To forestall a wish was immeasurably above gratifying a wish, if he had only felt certain which she would like. While he was ruminating she entered the room, looking, he thought, even more lovely than usual, with the flush of exercise still lingering on her face.

"I am so thirsty," she said, going towards the tea table. "It was really quite hot to-day, riding." Then she uttered a little exclamation of impatience.

"What is the matter, my love?" he asked.

"Only this wretch of a teapot gushed into the sugar the moment I closed the lid."

"What is the matter with it? Is there something wrong? Why do you not tell them to bring you another?"

"Oh, they are all alike. All teapots are the same. They do it on purpose to annoy one."

"Could you not design one, Ellinor, that you would like

better, or give such an idea as would enable Bridges & Bruce to design it? I would write at once about it. It cannot be necessary a teapot should do that. It must be some fault in the shape."

She turned with a laugh, and kissed his forehead.

"You dear old solemnity, how seriously you take things. It was only because I let the lid drop suddenly. I don't want a new teapot. You never give me a chance of wishing for anything, Stuart. You will force me at last to set my heart upon the Koh-i-noor, or the crown jewels, in order to enjoy the new sensation of wishing for something I cannot get."

And yet she stifled a sigh as she spoke. She did know very well indeed something she longed for, with, at times, an intense longing, and which as yet had been wholly denied to her, some symptom that she was to her husband something more than any other woman, suitable for the wife of a man of fortune, would have been. Something to make her feel that if she died the next day he would do more than mourn her with affectionate regret, and, in due time, marry again, and treat his new wife precisely as he had treated her.

General Farquharson, on the other hand, felt unalloyed gratification at her remark. Was it not her own admission that he was doing everything she could possibly expect a husband to do to promote her happiness? He turned, well satisfied, to the subject he had in hand.

"I had an unexpected visit this afternoon," he said.

"From Mr. Hepburn. Alison told me he had called. I think she felt the house to be in a measure sanctified. How are my pet collier and his wife?"

"He did not mention them."

"And you did not ask? How unfeeling of you, when

you must know that, at this moment, smashed colliers with prolific wives are the only things in creation in which I feel the slightest interest."

"Mr. Hepburn came to speak to me about a matter which has made me feel rather anxious, my love." And then he told her what had passed. "Have you any remembrance of the girl?" he asked.

"Yes, I remember her perfectly at the ball. She was very pretty, and a most outrageous little flirt. Alison told me she was the niece of the old housemaid here. She was a good dancer, too. Randolph and Charlie, and Sir Maurice, in fact all the men, were dancing and flirting with her, but there was no special favourite. You may depend the little monkey is fencing. Her volcanic lover can only have been wroth at her general flirting ways that night. If there is any special object of jealousy the feeling must have risen somewhere else. Probably she does not want Mr. Hepburn to find out who it is. I daresay it is one of the underkeepers. Johnstone had better warn them that if any one feels his conscience uneasy he should get himself armour-plated at once."

"My dear Ellinor, it is really no joking matter."

"I know it isn't. But it is so fatiguing to be always serious. Why, who is that coming up the approach on horseback? Oh, it's a groom I believe. Alas! I forbode a solemn dinner somewhere!"

In due time a note was brought to Lady Ellinor. "From Mrs. Chamberlayne," she said, as she looked at it. "Oh, it's this election ball they are getting up. They want us to go to them for two nights."

"I suppose, my love, you would like to go to the ball?" General Farquharson said, with a most heroic attempt to look as though the suggestion were not absolutely abhorrent to him.

Lady Ellinor glanced sharply at him. "There is no question of liking or disliking," she replied; "we must go. Col. Anson grows steadily worse. I heard so to-day. There is no question there will be a vacancy in the county before long. Sir Maurice declares, after the last report, he began shaking hands with all the colliers' wives; and that if the next is what he expects, he shall begin to kiss the babies. You must go and play at popularity, Stuart, or you will be hooted and scorned by every conservative in the county. You'll have to declare such a ball makes you feel like a gay young ensign again, and dance every dance. You'll have to waltz with all the fat, heavy, young women."

"I'll see the conservative interest at the devil before I'll do anything of the kind. However, I suppose we had better go; and as the Chamberlaynes are so much nearer the place, it will be very convenient to go from there; so you had better write and accept, my love."

He turned to leave the room as he spoke, quite satisfied that Lady Ellinor had not the faintest suspicion what a thing of unendurable tedium to him was a ball of any sort. And Lady Ellinor, with a heavy sigh, sat down to her writing table.

"Is that you, Alison?" she said, just as she was finishing her note, hearing sounds in the dressing-room.

"Yes, my lady."

"Then you might take this note. We are going to Danescourt for two nights for the election ball," she added, as the woman came into the room.

"I am very glad to hear it, my lady. It is quite time you had a little gaiety. I declare I don't believe your jewel case has been opened this two months."

"If only it did not bore the General so dreadfully."

"I'm sure it will do him good, my lady. He'll enjoy it when he gets there."

"Oh, will he? I wish you had only seen him at a ball. It's a sight to make a statue shed tears of commiseration, and he thinks all the time he is looking so perfectly happy and contented, that I shall never suspect he would rather be breaking stones on the highroad. However, he must go to this one for popularity sake, so I shall be able to enjoy a good dance, without feeling I have sacrificed him. There, take the note."

"My lady ought never to have allowed Lady Ellinor to marry him," was Mrs. Alison's muttered comment as she made her way down stairs with the note.

The acceptance was matter of much satisfaction to Mrs. Chamberlayne. The lamp of political ardour is not prone to burn brightly and steadily, unless plentifully fed with the oil of self-interest; and the oil, in this instance, was the success insured to her special party at the ball, by the fact of the Farquharsons belonging to it. She would be sure now, of securing all the men she wanted; and as they could not all dance simultaneously with Lady Ellinor, the reversionary interest would naturally fall to the share of her feminine following.

"It is so good of you to come to us," she said, when she and Lady Ellinor were drinking tea together in the drawing-room, just after the Farquharsons' arrival. We shall have a delightful party, and the ball is to be a grand success. Everyone is doing their utmost. I was quite afraid General Farquharson would never consent to come."

"Stuart not come? My dear Mrs. Chamberlayne, how little you know him. I convinced him that it was his duty to appear at the ball. Nor fire nor flood would keep him away now. He has been walking about, for the last two

days, with the air of a man about to lead a forlorn hope
But how is Col. Anson.

"Oh, worse decidedly. Poor Mrs. Anson! it makes me quite wretched to think of her. And we have been so dreadfully anxious, too. We were so afraid he might die just before the ball, and really then it would have been very difficult to know what to do. However, there seems to be no fear now but that he will last a week or two longer at least. Shall we go and get ready for dinner? We shall not make much change you know; we shall dress afterwards. We must all look our most magnificent to-night. Oh, and who do you think are coming to the ball? You will never guess. The Munros!"

"The Munros," repeated Lady Ellinor, evidently as much amazed as Mrs. Chamberlayne intended.

"Yes, indeed. Of course, you know, they are strong conservatives; but that is not the sole reason. Mrs. Munro has a niece, or cousin, or something staying with her, quite young, and she wants to amuse her. I don't know about the amusement. The girl cannot speak a word of English. I think she will find it dreadfully dull. So few men about here speak French. But come, we must really go up stairs; it only wants a quarter of an hour to dinner. We are dining early to give us plenty of time to adorn afterwards. You must be very splendid, remember."

CHAPTER IX.

BALL-ROOM INCIDENTS.

THERE was no question about the splendour when, some hours later, Lady Ellinor Farquharson entered the ball-room, richly but simply dressed, and wearing a few magnificent diamond ornaments.

Sir Maurice Adair came up at once to offer her a beautiful bouquet, and the delicate sprays of maiden-hair fern were quivering visibly as he held it. She glanced from the flowers to his face, and her manner grew a shade more cool and distant, though she spoke lightly.

"I hear poor Col. Anson is worse. Have you begun kissing the babies?"

"No. I reflected in time that the ardour of friendship was carrying me too far. I might be suspected of trying to get up a party on my own account, with a view to future contingencies, as Pitcairn must go to the upper house sooner or later. I have been explaining to him that he must do that for himself. He is practising. He has a little pig up at the stables, dressed in baby clothes; he takes it in his arms and fondles it twice a day with expressions of ardent endearment. I hear the first attempt was a frightful failure, but he is improving daily. His two married sisters have been present at one rehearsal, and say he will do in a little. The music is beginning. Am I to have this dance?"

"I think not. Duty first. I spy the approach of an important elector. I thought so," and with a gracious smile she took the arm of an influential personage in the county town.

More and more beautiful Lady Ellinor Farquharson grew as the evening wore on, and the heat of the room and the exercise of dancing deepened the flush on her cheek. Moving about with the easy careless grace which distinguished all her movements, and with a bright smile and pleasant word for every one, high or low, young or old, she was, as Lady Oastleton observed to her son, Lord Pitcairn, doing popularity enough for the whole country. It would have been well for her had she caught the sudden look of almost passionate admiration which came into her husband's eyes as she passed unexpectedly close to him, sweeping away in a moment the cold, formal expression habitual to his face, and rendering it unmistakably the handsomest face in the room. And she the while was looking carefully the other way, to avoid the irritation caused to her by his attitude of rigid, uncomplaining endurance.

Nevertheless she came hastily up to him a short time afterwards, suddenly leaving Sir Maurice Adair, with whom she had just been dancing, and putting her hand within his arm.

"I am tired and thirsty, Stuart. Come with me to the refreshment room," she said.

"Certainly my love. You are pale, Ellinor. Are you not feeling well? I fear you are over-fatiguing yourself."

"No, no; I am quite well. But I have danced rather persistently. I will sit out the next dance or two."

As they left the ball-room Mr. Chamberlayne seated himself on the end of a vacant bench, close behind his wife's chair, and leaning over spoke a few words quietly to her.

"It is too bad of Adair," he said. "These country town people are such outrageous gossips, he should be more careful. It would never do for a man to interfere; but couldn't you say a word to him?"

His wife gave her shoulders a little shrug. She was a woman of the world, with several daughters who were by no means beautiful, and the circumstances could not fail to give a certain tinge, however slight, to her sentiments towards a very beautiful woman.

"Certainly not," she replied. "Let her husband look after his own affairs. I am not fond of meddling with other people's business. It strikes me too, she knows what she is doing. Look how they have just gone off together, like a loving young couple."

In the refreshment room General Farquharson was devoting himself to his wife with praiseworthy assiduity, supplying her every want, entreating her not to overdo herself—doing, in fact, everything he could do save sit down beside her on the sofa on which he had placed her, and show that he could thoroughly enjoy this little interlude of quiet repose with a happy mingling of husband and lover. At any rate, however, he remained there very contentedly, and she seemed little inclined to return to the ball-room. They stayed where they were through several dances.

"I must go back," she said at last, as the music again struck up.

"Had you not better rest a little longer, Ellinor?"

"No," she replied, looking down at her card. "This is a waltz I promised Sir Maurice Adair. It is the last dance I mean to dance."

"Oh, well, then you must go," he said, looking down at her with a kindly smile. "Poor Adair! I believe he would blow his brains out if you failed him."

She cowered almost as if he had aimed a blow at her, and turned very white as she looked up at him with wild, entreating eyes. But he had turned away to put down the glass he had taken from her hand, and she was herself again

in a moment, and passed into the ball-room, leaning on his arm, with just her usual graceful charm of manner.

The waltz was not a very long one. "I have had enough," she said, after a few turns round the room. "Stop when you come to a convenient place."

He found that convenient place in a retired corner, and then stood there with her, talking in low tones; not much in his words, but a great deal in the wild passionate admiration expressed in every feature of his face. She was still and statuesque, but a hectic flush was deepening on her cheek. Suddenly she started, as a gentle hand was laid on her arm. Mrs. Munro was beside her.

Mrs. Munro was French by birth, but had married young, and lived in Scotland ever since. She had little about her to mark her origin save the extreme grace of a high-bred French woman. She was an elderly woman, very small, and very beautiful; looking even older than she really was, from her perfectly white hair. Her eyes were fixed on Lady Ellinor Farquharson's face with a pleading gentle expression.

"Dear Lady Ellinor Farquharson," she said, "forgive me, but you are very imprudent. See how those hangings just behind you are waving about with the draught. It cannot be safe for you to stand here, when heated with dancing. Please come and sit down where you will be sheltered from draught. I am surprised at you, Sir Maurice Adair," and she spoke with a sudden change to severe gravity of manner. "You must see that Lady Ellinor is in danger. You should be more careful."

Sir Maurice Adair grew crimson to the roots of his hair. Without a word Lady Ellinor drew Mrs. Munro's hand through her arm, and they walked away together.

"Dear Lady Ellinor," she said, as they sat, still side by

side, "You will not be angry? I know you so little, perhaps I was impertinent. But you remind me of my daughter, my only child, who died when she was eighteen years old. She was not so beautiful as you, but there is a likeness. I could not bear to see you in danger. Such serious consequences sometimes follow trifles."

"You are very kind. I fear I am rather a thoughtless woman."

"You are a very lovely one. Every one has been watching you all the evening. Do you know whose eyes have almost devoured you with admiration several times?"

A startled look crossed Lady Ellinor's face.

"No indeed," she said. "Someone who is of use, I hope. I have been doing popularity with all my might and main."

"Yes," said Mrs. Munro, with emphasis; "someone whose admiration is of great importance, General Farquharson."

Lady Ellinor laughed a hard, little laugh. "My husband! My dear Mrs. Munro, he has had the air of a martyr to duty all the evening. His face has worn no expression save that of a rigid determination not to flinch. I do not believe he even knows whether or not I have been in the room."

"You are quite wrong, believe me. General Farquharson is a Scotchman and a soldier, therefore undemonstrative and almost rigidly self-possessed. But it was all swept away in a moment once or twice to-night, when his eyes fell suddenly upon you. But tell me, who is this coming with my niece? Sir Maurice Adair introduced him; he said he was nice, and spoke French well. I did not catch his name. Do you know him?"

"By sight, yes. It is Mr. Laing. He is a retired lawyer. He lives in Mossiel. I believe he is very nice."

"Then I shall hand you over to his care. Mrs. Chamberlayne told me she was going after this dance. See, she is away yonder. I think she is looking for you. Mr. Laing, I wish to present you to Lady Ellinor Farquharson, who is going with Mrs. Chamberlayne's party, and whom you will please to see most carefully wrapped up and placed safely in her carriage. She is very precious. I believe she has won over a host of liberal voters to-night, and she takes no care of herself. Good-night, dear Lady Ellinor. We are going too. I hope you will not have caught cold."

As Mrs. Munro made her way through the rapidly lessening throng toward the entrance, Sir Maurice Adair came up to her, his manner betraying, in spite of evident effort at perfect ease, some little embarrassment.

"What have you done with Lady Ellinor Farquharson?" he said. "I am sent to tell her the Chamberlayne party are leaving, and to escort her to the cloak-room."

There was still a shadow of severity in Mrs. Munro's manner, although she answered lightly, pointing with her fan to the convenient hangings, now oscillating violently in the draught from the open door-way—

"You cannot again be trusted with anything so precious after allowing Lady Ellinor to stand yonder, when heated with dancing. She has already gone with Mr. Laing to join Mrs. Chamberlayne."

Very soon afterwards Mr. and Mrs. Munro were driving homeward alone in their brougham, the rest of their party following in another carriage. As soon as they were clear of the town, Mr. Munro turned towards her.

"That was admirably done of you, Clarie. But it is very unfortunate. What can Farquharson mean? Does he not see it?"

"He sees *it*, but he doesn't see the danger. He has never

gone through any experience which would enable him to understand it. He has a heart, but all the Queen's regulations are piled on top of it. It will rise up some day and scatter them all to the four winds. I only fear it may be too late."

"Did she understand you?"

"Yes; and so did Sir Maurice. I am grieved from my heart for both. Sir Maurice is not a bad man at heart, but he is carried completely beyond himself, and he is very fascinating. Bah! I have no patience with General Farquharson. If you had seen his look at her once to-night when she passed him. He has that in him which would make everything perfectly safe, if he would only give it play; though I doubt if he knows that himself. He is just one great manual of military tactics. I believe he puts on his nightcap with as much care and solemnity as if it was a cocked hat, and carefully preserves regulation pace when he is walking from his dressing-room to his bedroom. What business had he to marry a bright, high-spirited girl like Lady Ellinor?"

"I wonder if she cares for him?"

"Who can tell? They have the character of being an attached couple. But I know them so little. Ah! if there was only a judicious confessor all might be well. But what can these Protestant clergy do? They preach and preach, and sometimes by chance—they say the right thing to some one. But how can they tell the dangers which beset each individual? And if they could they dare not speak. If Lady Ellinor had a good confessor, I should go to him at once, and he would guide and counsel her, without her knowing that he was doing it, so that she would be warned before the danger really came. Poor, poor Lady Ellinor—so beautiful, and so alone."

It was a tolerably long drive from the town to Danescourt, and Lady Ellinor Farquharson drawing her hood closely round her face, on the plea of being heated, leaned back in the corner of the carriage, and hardly spoke at all. Alison, who was suffering under the infliction of a severe cold, had been peremptorily ordered not to sit up, and had retired, grumbling discontentedly, and declaring she would not get a wink of sleep for thinking how her lady was to get those diamonds out of her hair without tearing it out by the roots in handfuls. She was hardly to be consoled by the faithful promise of Mrs. Chamberlayne's maid, that she would herself undertake to avert this awful catastrophe.

Lady Ellinor, however, declined the proffered aid, affirming her own perfect capability of grappling with the diamonds. She had made no attempt to do so, however, but was standing still fully dressed before the fire, gazing into it with an abstracted air and troubled expression, when she was surprised with a tap at the door, which, before she had time to speak, was opened a few inches, to let her husband say—

“May I come in, Ellinor?”

“Certainly,” she replied. “I am all alone. I would not let Alison sit up. Her cold was so heavy.”

“So I heard, and therefore I came. I was anxious to speak to you. Were you annoyed by anything during the ball to-night, my love! I thought you looked rather pale and disturbed as we were driving home.”

She did not immediately reply; but a shower of sparkling flashes suddenly played all over her head, neck, and arms. She caught sight of them herself in a large glass over the chimney piece, and began hastily to unfasten the tell-tale diamonds.

“Yes Stuart,” she said at last, as she laid the jewels

aside. I can hardly say I was annoyed, but I was not quite pleased."

"What was wrong, my love?"

"I did not quite like Sir Maurice Adair's manner."

"My dear Ellinor, I am sure he was most devoted!"

"Yes, rather too much so. Mind, Stuart, I have nothing to accuse him of. Still I was conscious to-night that he made me feel his admiration rather more than I approved."

"Did he say anything?"

"Not a word. I should soon have settled that. Sir Maurice, as you know, is ardent enough in his protestations of devotion in your presence, out of it, he has always been most careful never to hint at such a thing. That is one of the reasons I have always liked him. But to-night there was a something in his manner I did not quite like. Nothing one could take hold of, yet something one felt."

"Well my love, if you will look so superbly beautiful as you did to-night, what can you expect?"

She raised her somewhat weary, heavy eyes to his face, with a wistful look, but alas! she did not meet any such glance as Mrs. Munro had intercepted—only a quiet, half-amused smile, which she tried faintly to return.

"A man should be careful in public. I fear others noticed it, and there were a lot of gossiping people there."

"Let them and their gossip go to the devil. What do I care?"

"Still, Stuart, I think, perhaps——"

"Perhaps what?"

"That perhaps," she replied, with some effort, "it might be better if he did not come to us quite so often."

General Farquharson's face grew grave, slightly stern. "My dear Ellinor," he said, "are you dealing quite honestly

with me. I mean," he added, noticing the startled glance she cast upon him, "in saying that Adair has given you no direct cause for displeasure."

"Perfectly," she replied. "It would be the cruellest injustice to Sir Maurice to make any such accusation against him."

"Then, my love, I cannot sanction the least change in our conduct to Adair. I could not face the possibility of anything being construed into a want of perfect confidence in yourself on my part. That Adair admires you a little more than is safe for his own piece of mind I should think is highly probable. But he must take care of himself. In the excitement of a ball-room he might perhaps betray his admiration a shade too clearly; but I am convinced that he is perfectly incapable of ever failing in proper respect to you. Until you tell me yourself that he has done so, I cannot bring myself to act in a way which would seem to me to imply a possibility of my feeling uneasy about your own conduct.

"I think you are making a mistake, Stuart," she said, faintly.

"No, my Ellinor," he confidently replied, "not where you are concerned. Adair, remember, is by no means a dissipated, profligate character. Few unmarried men of his age and position bear so good a reputation. Your manner I feel convinced will never let him pass the proper bounds. I am not bound to constitute myself the guardian of his peace of mind. If he chooses to singe his wings he must take the consequences. But I am bound not to give cause for the very faintest suspicion of any want of confidence in you. And now, my love, you must go to bed as quickly as you can. You are very pale, my dearest; and what a cold hand!"

"I am tired," she said; and then he bestowed upon her a gravely affectionate kiss, and left the room.

Lady Ellinor stood rigidly where he had left her for a few moments. Then she threw herself down upon a couch, and gave way to a passionate burst of weeping. What could she do in face of this unshakable confidence? How reply to it by telling him her defences were becoming strained?—that she was already conscious, not as yet, of a single feeling towards Maurice Adair for which she had occasion to blush, but of a growing perception of the deficiency in himself—of an increased longing for something more ardent, more lover-like, than his unvarying, courteous affection—and of an instinctive, though hardly defined, dread of Sir Maurice Adair's society? The worst her conscience could bring against her was, that she had received, without any displeasure, that night an amount of admiration which had attracted attention. But that admission had brought her a startled sense of pain, and, for the moment, a more distinct perception of danger than she had ever before experienced. A feeling akin to remorse had induced her to seize the opportunity afforded by her husband's unexpected question, to caution him and guard herself, and in both attempts she had hopelessly failed. Was his action prompted by implicit confidence, or did it spring from a certain sluggishness of feeling, born in some measure of cold indifference, a confidence that she would never stoop to culpability in actual conduct, and indifference respecting anything else? That question also arose in her mind for the first time that night, or rather morning; so it may be, after all, that Mrs. Munro was not far from the truth when she said that if there had only been a judicious confessor all might yet be well.

The following evening Mr. Laing strolled into the manse about eight o'clock.

"Hulloa," said the minister. "Are you just out of bed?"

"No, I am just out of the train. I stopped at the Station Hotel, and breakfasted, lunched, and dined all in one, just in time to catch the last train. I'm come to smoke a cigar, so you can shut up your books, and resign yourself to idleness.

"Very good," and Mr. Hepburn pushed his books aside, and turned round to the fire. Mr. Laing lighted his cigar, and drew up an arm chair. But he seemed to be in an unusually taciturn humour. Mr. Hepburn glanced keenly at him once or twice, then he quietly remarked,

"Dissipation doesn't seem to agree with you, Laing."

"The ball last night didn't agree with me, if you like. But the dissipation had nothing to do with it."

"What then?"

Mr. Laing did not immediately reply. Then, almost petulantly, he threw away his half smoked cigar, and leaning back in his chair, thrust his hands with a sort of savage gesture deep into his pockets.

"Hang it all," he said. "I'm really cut up about that poor girl."

"What girl?"

"Lady Ellinor Farquharson."

"What of her?" asked the minister, in a startled tone.

"Everything. I've thought of nothing else since last night. I don't think I ever saw her look so lovely. Her dress was perfect, and among that mob of overdressed women she looked simply superb."

"Oh, oh! So it's you who are suffering from singed wings, is it?" replied the minister, a trifle sardonically.

"I wish that was all. There would be no great harm done then. It's a much more dangerous butterfly than I am that is singeing wings, body and all, and not only singeing, growing red hot."

"Sir Maurice Adair?"

"Exactly. You know then?"

"I don't know. But I have seen enough to make me very uneasy."

"It was unmistakable last night. He was almost off his head. She kept him well in check, for I was watching them closely. I think she felt it. Once or twice I thought she was half frightened. Unfortunately other people saw it, too. I heard a good many remarks."

"And General Farquharson?"

"Old blockhead. He was only wondering all the time I believe, how soon he might get away to his bed. Mrs. Munro is an angel. She struck in just in time to prevent him, I believe, from losing his head altogether, and then handed her over to me."

"That was most angelic, doubtless."

"Don't be sarcastic, Hepburn. It's all your jealousy. It just kept Sir Maurice off."

"Were any Mossgiel people there besides yourself?"

"Very few, fortunately, and also fortunately most of them had to leave early, some hitch about trains I believe. But, seriously, I am afraid there will be some catastrophe there. General Farquharson must be either a great fool or very indifferent."

"The latter he certainly is not," replied Mr. Hepburn slowly, reviewing in his mind all the incidents of his first visit to Strathellon. "He is deeply attached to Lady Ellinor. But I think he does not in the least understand the case, and would think it an insult to her to allow the thought of any danger to cross his mind."

"In fact he is blind, and every one else must pretend to be so; and so the poor girl must be left to drift away unaided."

"My dear fellow that is the beauty of social distinctions. Here are you and I and Mrs. Twædie, all most anxious about her, and ready to make any effort on her behalf; and if she was the wife of a Mossiel tradesman we should soon be doing something. But as she happens to be Lady Ellinor Farquharson, we are obliged to stand aside and only sigh and shake our heads, and say it is very sad."

"I shouldn't have thought you would have shied so quickly at social distinctions, Hepburn."

"No more I do. It's the social distinctions shy at me. What can I do? If Lady Ellinor would give me a chance, do you think I would hesitate to warn her, even though it might shut me for ever out of the house? But I should only do harm rather than good by any attempt to force an opportunity; and it is not to deliver a faithful message, I am anxious, but to put her on her guard. Depend upon it, if the chance should be given to me to warn her, without doing more harm than good, I will not be found wanting."

Mr. Laing reflected in silence for a few minutes. Then he heaved a deep sigh, and as he turned to light another cigar, remarked—

"You've lighted upon some old subjects on which to try your hand since you came. How is Robert Blackwood?"

"Quite well now, I think. I suspect he was assiduous in his attentions to his damaged face. Biding at home doesn't suit him."

"It has always struck me, Hepburn," said Mr. Laing, closely watching the minister as he spoke, "that it was a very extraordinary thing that you should have knocked him down in the dark in that way, and avoided running over him."

"Whether it is extraordinary or not," replied Mr. Hepburn calmly, "it is extremely fortunate. The pony gave

such a spring that, I suspect, if the wheel had come in contact with such a big fellow as that, the cart would have turned over, and there would have been a general smash."

"In which case it is just possible he might have got the credit of having tried to shoot you."

"Just what I was thinking at the moment—at least, that he might have been credited with having intended to do so. Unless I had broken my neck, I could have sworn the pistol did not go off until after he was knocked down."

"You would be a tough subject for cross-examining I should say. But I have thought a great deal over that matter since you spoke to me about it. I have in fact done little else than rake among my mental rubbish for any lingering shreds of gossip which might point in the direction of some possible dreaded rival, but without result. Sometimes, Hepburn, I am almost inclined to think you are wrong, and that the girl has nothing to do with it. You'll hardly guess in what direction my thoughts do turn occasionally."

"Certainly not, if the girl is out of it."

"Entirely. What say you to our worthy elder, Cruikshanks?"

Mr. Hepburn shook his head. "I can't catch your clue," he said.

"I haven't one. It is nothing meriting the name of clue. But I do honestly believe Cruikshanks has something to do with the grocer's business of Ronald and Robson in Porter's Wynd. I've never been able to unearth Ronald and Robson, and it sounds uncommonly like a fancy title. I have seen the Blackwoods hanging about there, not exactly as if they were customers; and if a great deal of tea, tobacco, and spirits are not sold there which never paid the revenue a farthing, I'm greatly mistaken. They are as cunning as

foxes. If you or I went there we should get only ordinary goods. But I have got hold of both tea and tobacco from them of a quality never sold at the price, if it had paid lawful duty."

"Well, but what has that to do with Blackwood?" said the minister, a little impatiently. The conversation was taking a most distasteful turn. He was by no means satisfied himself about the shop in question; and the fact, in connection with Mr. Cruikshanks' eldership, was a perpetual fret and worry to him.

"A good deal, possibly. The Blackwoods are all good seamen, and do, I suspect, a great deal of the smuggling business. In that case, a quarrel with Cruikshanks would be an extremely probable result. Only I can't see any reason for the time and place of your meeting."

"No, you are wrong. The girl is at the bottom of the business, I am certain, whether with or without cause I cannot make out. I can't say you've been a very cheering companion to-night, Laing," he added a little wearily. "Lady Ellinor—Blackwood—Cruikshanks—about as unsatisfactory subjects for ministerial reflection as a man could well have brought before him."

"There are more of the same sort behind," replied Mr. Laing, grimly. "You'll have other subjects to occupy your attention before long than the defalcations of individual sheep. You'll have a great hymnal row on your hands shortly, or I'm much mistaken."

"Ah! I've heard some mutterings about that storm already."

"It has been hanging over us for a long while. Forsyth contrived to stave it off for a time. I really believe, dread of it had nearly as much to do with his resignation, as his health. I suspect it'll not be long now before it comes on. Which side do you take?"

“I’ll tell you that when the time comes. And look you here, Laing, it is high time that you, who were aping juvenility, and dancing all last night, should be in bed. If you stop here much longer, I don’t believe there will be a single disagreeable subject in the whole range of my experience you won’t have contrived to trot out for inspection.”

“Good-night, then, I’ll not take the trouble, another time, to come and amuse your solitude, after I’ve been to a ball.”

“Pray don’t, for I shall take good care to be out.”

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CHAPTER X.

A SOFT-SPOKEN ELDER.

MRS. WATSON'S serious misgivings respecting Mr. Hepburn, planted in the congenial soil of her sense of not having been treated with the consideration due to her social position, had thriven amazingly, and thrown out feelers in all directions, to clutch at cognate matter. It was only due to Mr. Watson's position, as head of the factory, that any suspicious circumstance in reference to any family connected therewith should be at once communicated to him ; whereas, but for her watchfulness, this suspicious episode of the Blackwood tribe would have remained wholly unknown to him. The presence of some friends on the evening of the day she had visited the Blackwoods prevented her from laying the facts then and there before him, and during the next twenty-four hours she gathered, or excogitated, much which she was pleased to dignify with the term of indirect testimony. The next evening she laid the matter fully before her husband. Mr. Watson at the first moment seemed inclined to fail in grasping its full importance ; but then he was not suffering from personal pique, and, moreover, had far less leisure time than fell to the share of his wife to devote to any such reflections. To tell the truth, while she was recounting her tale of gloomy portent, his thoughts more than once wandered away to a rather perplexing question respecting the relative value and cost of some suggested improvements in machinery, about which the directors of his company had asked for his opinion ; so that, sad to say, when the tale was told, he

found his comprehension of the matter somewhat hazy, and felt that there was safety for him only in vague generalities.

"These Blackwoods have always been a questionable lot."

"All the more reason that you should have been instantly informed of anything respecting them."

"Oh, I don't know. None of the sons are in the factory. As long as Blackwood keeps himself sober, I don't think I should trouble myself about the others."

"You ought to have been told," Mrs. Watson replied emphatically, "still, I confess I am more concerned about this acquaintance with Lady Ellinor Farquharson. I consider it most unfortunate."

In those secret recesses of the mind, in which men store up the sentiments and opinions which they do not invariably intrust to even the authorized shares of their whole existence, Mr. Watson was probably conscious that an acquaintance with Lady Ellinor Farquharson was not a circumstance to which any man could be expected to hold the term "unfortunate" justly applicable; but he did not say so. He fell back on the safe suggestion.

"I suppose he met her at Mrs. Tweedie's?"

"He did nothing of the kind," replied Mrs. Watson, with much emphasis. "I know that for a certainty."

"Well, I suppose he met her somewhere else."

"Met her; yes, I suppose so." Then Mrs. Watson laid down the piece of fancy work with which she had been trifling, and leaning back in her chair, folded her arms with the air of a person about to deliver some most tremendous statement.

"Just remember, William, if you please, that within forty-eight hours of the time when Mrs. Haigg heard him affirm he had never seen Lady Ellinor, save at a distance, she was visiting Thompson, admittedly by his request.

There is some mystery in all this, and you know mystery always presupposes guilt."

"Oh, nonsense, my dear, you go too far. It doesn't follow that a thing is a mystery because you do not happen to know exactly how it came about."

"I beg your pardon," replied Mrs. Watson, with some asperity. "There is a mystery. Not only must he have been telling a falsehood when he denied the acquaintance, but how could it have come about? No one about here could have introduced him save Mrs. Tweedie. She, I know, did not. How did they make acquaintance? Unless you can explain that fact you must allow there is something very suspicious about the whole transaction."

"Why, good Lord, my dear?" exclaimed Mr. Watson, beginning dimly to discern the direction of his wife's suspicions, "You don't mean to say you suppose it's a clandestine flirtation between Lady Ellinor Farquharson and Hepburn?"

"I don't suppose anything. I have told you what I know. I am quite certain that woman is capable of any sort of coquetry."

Lady Ellinor had once smiled on Mr. Watson. His wife did not know that; neither, in truth, did Lady Ellinor herself, for he had merely, at a local flower show, moved a bench out of her way, which service she had acknowledged with the graceful courtesy that never failed her. Mr. Watson, however, had a vivid remembrance of the incident, and he muttered something which his wife did not catch.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing. I am sick of all this gossip and chatter. Why on earth must you all be for ever running down Lady Ellinor?"

"I have never heard any one run her down," replied Mrs.

Watson, with a certain intonation not unknown to her husband, who forthwith took up the paper and began to read.

It so chanced that the very next day Mr. Watson heard the whole story of the accident to Lady Ellinor Farquharson's pony carriage, and the minister's timely intervention, and subsequent visit to Strathellon. He was perfectly satisfied that he was the possessor of a most excellent wife, but still there were moments when he was conscious that the atmosphere of authority which surrounded him at the factory did not accompany him to his home, where occasionally, a little more deference to his opinions would have been soothing to his feelings. He was not, therefore, able to rise superior to a little malicious satisfaction at finding himself in a position to turn the seamy side of his wife's hypotheses outward.

"A very pretty mare's nest you've found," he said, having concluded his recital. "Hepburn never told any falsehood, and there is no mystery at all. I do hope, my dear, you'll think of what I said, and remember another time that it does not necessarily follow a thing is a mystery because you chance not to know exactly how it came about. There is a great deal too much of that sort of manufacturing of mysteries in the town," he continued, feeling himself kindling into eloquence, under the influence of a rare chance of being didactic. "It does a heap of mischief sometimes, I can tell you."

Mrs. Watson made no reply. For once she was worsted for the moment. There was no falsehood, no clandestine acquaintance. Her personal annoyance had run away with her judgment, and urged her into being too explicit in her charges. Angry mortification kept her silent; but could her husband have seen the workings of her mind he would

probably have become aware that the assumption of a reprovingly-instructive tone is apt to be quite as dangerous as the manufacture of mysteries. Mr. Hepburn was henceforth associated in Mrs. Watson's mind with a mortifying fiasco, in respect of that shrewdness and sagacity on which she especially prided herself. Her sentiments towards the minister became from that moment distinctly hostile, although to herself they only assumed the character of gravely increased misgivings.

For all that much is both spoken and written upon the subject of personal affinities, sufficient allowance is hardly made, in the moral sphere, for the law of attraction. Let any two persons, within a reasonable distance, possess a strongly-defined common sentiment on any subject, and they will very shortly arrive at an understanding. There was another person in Mossgiel who strongly shared Mrs. Watson's grave misgivings, incited thereunto by a similar, if not exactly identical, sentiment. Mr. Cruikshanks had, from the first, strongly opposed Mr. Hepburn's election. Seeking reasons for a dislike, rather than disliking him for a reason, he had alleged that his previous ministrations in Mossgiel had been strongly suggestive of Rationalistic theories, and a loose vague tone of theology. Since the appointment he had felt that his previous sentiments had been a kind of foreboding. He never felt quite comfortable in the minister's presence. There was something excessively disagreeable, he averred, in the expression of his face ; and with that keen piercing glance fixed upon him, he had never felt himself able, without a sense of painful effort, to assume at meetings of the kirk session that tone of lofty, austere piety in which he delighted. No metaphorical charm against the evil eye, which he could hang around the neck of his piety, would give it courage to meet without

shrinking that steady, searching grey eye, which, to his infinite annoyance, seemed to have no terrors for some far less eminently pious members of the session than himself.

Mr. Cruickshank's shop was a large and important one, and was arranged with much skill and judgment. The post office business was carried on at a counter on one side of the entrance, the ordinary stationery business at an opposite counter. Further back, the shop widened into a good-sized room, comfortably carpeted, with well-filled book-shelves all round it, and various tables standing about with the newest illustrated works laid out upon them for inspection. Mr. Cruickshanks himself was always at hand, ready to show a new book or discuss the last piece of news, or if his tact told him he was not wanted, to retire to a small glass pen in the background, where he wrote letters and attended to business in general; invariably suave, smiling, and deferential in manner, soft in speech, and noiseless in movement. Needless to say that a vast amount of information was both given and received within the precincts of Mr. Cruickshanks' domains.

It chanced one day, soon after Mr. Watson's great disaster, that she turned into Mr. Cruickshanks' shop in search of some small requirement, and espying a group in the inner room, among which, at the first moment, she recognized only Mrs. Tweedie and Mr. Laing, she advanced toward them with a cordial air. He who has ever chanced to see a dog rush to meet his master with frantic manifestations of exuberant joy, and then discover that he was approaching a stranger, can exactly picture to himself the sudden change which passed upon Mrs. Watson. The remaining constituents of the group were Lady Ellinor Farquharson and Mr. Hepburn. Mr. Laing afterwards declared that her very eyelashes grew quite stiff and rigid, as she passed with a

distant salutation, and took refuge among the books on a neighbouring table, where Mr. Cruickshanks, noticing everything from his observatory, at once came to the rescue, asking, in his most dulcet tones, if Mrs. Watson required anything?

"Oh, no! only a little note book, which your people can find for me presently; and, for the moment, to see if you have anything new which is very charming."

"I have a delightful little publication somewhere which I am sure you will like. Where is it? I saw a copy lying about this morning. Eh, what is it?" he added, as a shopman came up with an open letter in his hand, and said something in a low tone.

"Excuse me one moment," Mr. Cruickshanks said to Mrs. Watson, "I will bring you that book directly." And he walked away with his subordinate, leaving her to such unmolested occupation of her eyes and ears as might please her.

Lady Ellinor and Mrs. Tweedie were both seated at the table, looking over a new illustrated work. Mr. Laing was standing behind Mrs. Tweedie, Mr. Hepburn leaning against the table beside Lady Ellinor.

"I don't like it," Lady Ellinor was saying. "I am sure the drawing is not correct, and it is sketchy and coarse in execution."

"Rough," said Mr. Hepburn, "if you like, but not coarse, and it is only meant for a sketch. What would you have? The sentimental Medoras and Gulnares of sixty years ago? It is more correct in drawing than they used to be, at any rate. I remember, when I was a little boy, there were lots of those old books about, and I used to wonder often, if one of these monstrosities could have taken out her eye and tried to swallow it, how much she could have managed to squeeze into her mouth at once."

"What a horrid little boy you must have been," said Lady Ellinor, laughing.

"I daresay I was, but, at any rate, I had an eye for proportion. I never could tolerate conventional art. I was never trimmed up mentally when I was growing, like the hedges in an old-fashioned garden. I suppose that's the reason."

"No," replied Lady Ellinor ; "you were allowed to grow as you liked, and straggle about everywhere to trip every one up with rude realism. Mrs. Tweedie, I must really go. Mr. Hepburn, would you kindly tell them to put this book into the carriage for me. I must really have that stalwart shepherdess, that I may remember the lesson in high art she has secured for me."

She smiled upon him as she spoke ; and the ever ready Mr. Cruickshanks, appearing just at the right moment, laid down the volume he was bringing for Mrs. Watson, and with his blindest deference took the book from the minister's hand and delivered it over to an attendant to be put up, while he himself attended Lady Ellinor to the door with an air of the profoundest respect. Then he returned to Mrs. Watson.

"Our minister is getting quite into high society, is he not ?" he remarked. "It is something quite new for Lady Ellinor Farquharson to show herself so much in Mossiel."

"And something as undesirable as new, at least for Mr. Hepburn I should say. It seems to me that a minister is the last man who should push himself into the society of people of rank and position who are in no way connected with his congregation."

Mr. Cruickshanks made a sort of slight deprecatory motion with hands and shoulders. "You are always an outspoken woman, Mrs. Watson. It often falls to you to put

distinctly into words, for the first time, what a great many people are thinking."

"Yes, I always say what I think. And I am quite sure you agree with me."

Mr. Cruickshanks looked down, and began turning round one of the books lying on the table. "You know I was opposed to Mr. Hepburn's election from the first," he said at length. "I have endeavoured since to look at the subject as impartially as possible; but I cannot say my regret that we did not secure Mr. Fraser has in any way decreased."

It was very soothing to Mrs. Watson's internal fret and annoyance to find herself thus in communication with a kindred spirit. She began to expand into a highly confidential mood.

"You have, of course, heard the account of the beginning of this acquaintance with Lady Ellinor Farquharson, and of the accident to Robert Blackwood?"

"Of course."

"Well, now, tell me, as between friends you know, what do you think of the story?"

"Of which?" said Mr. Cruickshanks, with a honied smile. "There are two stories, you see."

"Of both."

"Of the first, then, I can only say that from all the circumstances I am inclined to think the actual *occurrences* must have been much as they were described. But then, you know, occurrences are the results of causes. I think, in the present case, we are much in the dark respecting causes."

"True, very true; you put it admirably." Mrs. Watson began really to regret that Mr. Cruickshanks so indisputably kept a shop. She would have liked to ask him to dinner. "And the other story," she said.

"There, again, I am at fault. If I am told that a man walking along a quiet road, on a not exceptionally dark night, has been knocked down by another man, driving a very quiet horse, I can only reply—someone must be much to blame."

"Ah," said Mrs. Watson. She began to feel that her thoughts were being put into shape for her. "But who?"

"There I can but balance facts against one another. Robert Blackwood is a quick, intelligent fellow, and not, as far as I am aware, at all inclined to his father's bad habits. Does he seem to you, Mrs. Watson, a very likely man to stand in the middle of the road and wait to be run over?"

"Most unlikely."

"Then, again, he was treated with a very remarkable amount of care and attention, almost as though some atonement for an injury was felt to be due. And there seems marked disinclination, on both sides, to give any information about the matter."

"That is quite true," replied Mrs. Watson. "Still, I don't see exactly what to think."

"I think I see what to wish," said Mr. Cruickshanks; "and that is when Mr. Hepburn goes out to dinner he would let someone else drive him home."

Mrs. Watson was so much startled that she dropped the book she was holding and exclaimed—"Good gracious! I never thought of such a thing!"

"Pray do not say that I first suggested it then. We are of course speaking confidentially, and it is mere suspicion. Still, I cannot help seeing how the idea explains everything that seems most unaccountable. Few people have, I suspect, defined their feelings to themselves clearly, but I am convinced that there is a very uneasy sensation abroad. In my opinion, it has arisen at a peculiarly unfortunate time."

"How so?"

"Did you observe what book it was you had taken up, and dropped a moment since?" And he placed in her hand again the authorized Free Church Hymnal. "The question of the introduction of that book is coming upon us. I think it peculiarly unfortunate that just at such a time the minds of the congregation should be uneasy about their minister."

"Is he going to try and force it upon us?"

Again Mr. Cruickshanks gave his little meaning shrug. "I am in no position to say. On all these subjects the trumpet gives a most uncertain sound. Of course no formal proposition on the subject has yet been put forward; but, as you know, among a certain class, chiefly I think the younger members of the congregation, there is a strong wish for the introduction of the book, and I confess I have tried to elicit some direct expression of opinion on the point, but in vain. A few platitudes about forbearance, and consideration for others were all I could draw out. This may be Christian charity, but I must allow, to me, it seems dangerously like a tendency to swim with the stream."

"It's abominable!" exclaimed Mrs. Watson. "When we are threatened with such a dangerous innovation we want a minister who will speak out boldly. Come in this evening and we will talk the matter over with Mr. Watson. He hates the idea of the hymn book. A well organized opposition should be got up at once."

"Not too fast, my dear madam. We must be wary, or we may only precipitate matters. It would not do to organize any opposition against a scheme which has never been put forward. We must abide our time, and only be prepared to act vigorously when the occasion arises."

At this point in the discussion Mr. Cruickshanks' attention to some matter of business was claimed, and Mrs.

Watson went her way, provided with much fresh matter for reflection. She had not hitherto been conscious of possessing very decided opinions herself on either side of the great hymn book question. But now that it appeared that Mr. Hepburn was not apparently disposed to regard it as one of extreme importance, there seemed to be at least a strong presumption in favour of holding it to be a point of grave moment. Any opinion held by a man round whom such sinister appearances were clustering must necessarily be of doubtful value ; and she at once turned her attention to such preparations as she deemed desirable for, as Mr. Cruickshanks put it, acting vigorously when the occasion arose.

Thus, with a strong party for and a strong party against, it would not have needed as shrewd an observer as Mr. Laing to predict, that for a minister who would not throw his weight heavily on either side there were troubled waters ahead.

CHAPTER XI.

A DEPUTATION.

THESE troubled waters, however, were not immediately ahead, and for a while all the perplexities which specially vexed James Hepburn's spirit seemed inclined to lay themselves down and slumber peacefully.

Sir Maurice Adair's sensations, when he found himself smoking a cigar out of his bedroom window in the early dawn of the morning after the ball, were not of an enviable nature. He was no selfish profligate, and it was not without many struggles, and much self-reproach, that he was yielding to his infatuated passion for Lady Ellinor Farquharson; and above all other things, the thing he would have wished most carefully to avoid would have been any such action as should tend to render her the object of the tattle and gossip of a country town. Yet that very thing he was fully conscious he had done. Mrs. Munro's action alone had been sufficient to proclaim the fact, without several small shafts hurled at him by different acquaintances, in the midst of the struggle for hats and coats as the ball broke up.

It is not only the devil who interferes opportunely. A man's guardian angel will sometimes do as much for him. When, about noon, Sir Maurice awoke from a troubled sleep, and rang his bell, among the letters which his servant brought to him was one from an old friend, urging him to join a large party in the country in the south of England, where the prospects for the hunting season were unusually

good, and demanding an immediate reply. "The very thing," he murmured to himself, as he glanced over it. "Nothing could be better." If he left the neighbourhood at once, for some time, all scandal would soon die out. So, under pressure of his genuine remorse, the invitation was at once accepted, and he started for England without even seeing Lady Ellinor again.

Robert Blackwood, also, was ere long safely & far for the time, and without suspicion of any nefarious project. He was a practised seaman, and came to the manse one morning with less of thunder about his appearance than the minister had ever seen, to say that he had undertaken to go with a cousin, who owned and sailed a small trading vessel, for a cruise, as the boat was short of hands, and that he should be absent for some weeks; an intimation which aroused in Mr. Hepburn's mind a strong inclination to try and find out if any of the out door establishment of Strathellon had lately left, or were temporarily absent? With Sir Maurice Adair and Robert Blackwood out of the way, neither Lady Ellinor nor Mary Warrender were very grave sources of anxiety.

Naturally the scandal of the county ball came flying to Mossgiel on the wings of the wind. But the report of Sir Maurice Adair's almost immediate departure was a blast which swept it away to perish in the wilderness, for Lady Ellinor Farquharson looked neither pale nor pensive. She had a large party in the house at Strathellon, and was as lively and animated in appearance as anyone could wish.

It was not for very long, however, that Mr. Hepburn was left to work out his conception of ministerial duty undisturbed by sounds of the breakers, which were surely if not immediately ahead. The would-be disturbers of the peace of the church, in the matter of the hymnal, had a very con-

siderable number of side issues in their favour. There was a precentor, who was a very fair musician, and did not greatly relish the honour of being sole leader of a congregation who sang with much zeal, but with a somewhat liberal estimate of the extent to which individual preferences might be indulged in psalmody. There were sundry young men and women in the congregation with good voices, who clearly discerned behind the hymnal a choir, in which these voices might be heard with personal pleasure, and congregational advantage; and there were, doubtless, a patient suffering few, who recognised in the hymnal and choir their only hope of the silencing of certain ear-piercing sounds, which weekly filled their souls with dismay. Mr. Hepburn knew it all, and knew what must come. Nor was he unobservant of sundry hints meant to suggest to him the desirability of his taking the initiative in the matter. But he held his peace, and bided his time.

One day he chanced to meet Mr. Laing, who greeted him with a grimly sardonic countenance, and the words—

“You are in for it now, my dear fellow.”

“In for what?”

“A deputation. You are to be interviewed on the subject of the hymnal.”

“Who form the deputation?”

“Watson, Cruickshanks, and myself.”

“Watson and Cruickshanks do not want to see the hymnal introduced.”

“That is just why they are coming to talk to you about it. It is not likely the actual question will be raised immediately, but it is drawing nearer. The precentor is at work, and has been urging Wylie and his wife to take the matter in hand. They labour under the delusion that they are musical, and are flattered by being put prominently

forward in business. They are trying to get up an agitation on the subject, so the orthodox party, seeing that the enemy are astir, think that it is time for them also to be on the alert; and they mean to try and take the wind out of their sails by making the first bid for your vote."

"And what in the world are they bringing you with them for, Laing? you, who have not too ounces of orthodoxy in your whole composition."

"That is just what I cannot quite make out myself." I think it must be to give a sort of whole congregation tone to the deputation; to prevent it appearing to be a strongly one-sided movement. At anyrate we're coming. What shall you say?"

"That depends on what is said to me. When are you coming?"

"That isn't quite settled. It is not a formal deputation, you know; it is a sort of irregular proceeding, just to talk the matter over in a friendly way. There will be a stiff breeze when the question really comes forward."

"I know there will, and I heartily wish they had let it alone for another year. I would fain have been somewhat firmer in the saddle before any disturbance of this sort came in my way."

He went on his way with, for the first time, a half sigh for his lost rural solitude. This was not the sort of opportunity for increased activity which he had had in view when he accepted the call of the Mossiel congregation. To do the genuine work of the church, to strive unweariedly to lift all classes to a higher nobler conception of the Christian life, this had been the kind of labour to which he was prepared to devote himself heart and soul. But to interpose between the dogs of war, and get sharply bitten on both sides for his pains, was the immediate prospect before him.

And when he had thus sacrificed himself, would any one be in any way the gainer? He shook his head impatiently over it, with only the slight satisfaction of feeling that at least his own course was perfectly clear.

The worthy Mr. Cruickshanks would fain have been clear of that deputation; but he could hardly refuse to accept a leading place in a movement which he had himself mainly contributed to set on foot. He did not like the minister, but he liked still less Robert Blackwood's openly avowed admiration for him; neither did he like Mr. Laing, although his attitude towards him was less pronounced than it would probably have been had he been aware of his underhand experiments on the quality of Messrs. Ronald and Robson's tea. He only felt towards him such sentiments as caused him to find much satisfaction in speaking of him as a lawyer of the sharp attorney class. Thus, though fully conscious that his personal character entitled him to a prominent place in any religious movement, he waived his just claim, and left Mr. Watson to take the lead.

"I entirely deprecate the introduction of the book," he said, "but I should prefer not to take a specially prominent part in the question. The world is not too ready to give one credit for disinterestedness, and, as Mr. Calderwood is agent here for the sale of the hymn book, my motives might be open to misconstruction."

It was therefore from Mr. Watson that the minister shortly after received a note to ask if it would be convenient for him to receive Messrs. Laing, Cruickshanks, and himself, on a certain evening, for the purpose of a little friendly chat over some matters of business? And it was Mr. Watson who headed the deputation, when it made its entrance, with much solemnity, into Mr. Hepburn's study.

"This is not exactly a formal business interview, you

know, Mr. Hepburn," Mr. Watson began. "The fact is, simply, we see clearly that there is a party amongst us which means, sooner or later, to agitate for the introduction of hymns into public worship. Therefore, we think it well to take a little friendly counsel with you on the subject before it is forced upon our attention as a congregation."

"Do you think there is much use in discussing these matters, Mr. Watson, before they are ripe for settlement? It often seems to me that by so doing we heat our tempers, and only end in attaching more importance to questions than they intrinsically deserve, through bringing excited personal feeling to bear upon them."

"You don't regard the hymnal question, then, as one of grave importance?" said Mr. Laing, with most praiseworthy gravity. A curious flash of expression passed over the minister's face, but ere he had time to reply, Mr. Watson broke in, irritably—

"I wish you wouldn't use that word 'hymnal.' It's a new fangled, Papistical sort of word. Why can't you say hymn book?"

"My dear fellow, it isn't the Pope—it's the telegraph that is to blame. We condense in these days. Hymnal is one word, hymn book two, don't you see? It's the force of habit."

"But we haven't heard Mr. Hepburn's answer to the question," put in the suave tones of Mr. Cruickshanks.

"The question does not admit of a general answer, Mr. Cruickshanks. The importance of it depends, in each particular case where it comes under consideration, upon local circumstances. If it were a question of vital principle—"

"Do you not then consider it one," interrupted Mr. Cruickshanks.

"Question for question. Do you?"

"I confess I am inclined to take that view."

"Then you are at issue with the general feeling of our church, as embodied in the decision of the Assembly. By sanctioning the use of the hymn book in any congregation where a majority are in favour of it, the Assembly has stamped the question as, in its judgment, one of mere expediency. If you hold that our Church has thus pronounced a question of vital principle to be one of expediency, I can't see on what theory you can remain conscientiously a member of it."

Mr. Cruickshanks became even more suave and bland.

"We are all aware," he said, "that Mr. Hepburn does not hold absolutely with our Assembly in all things—the preaching as a selected candidate, for instance—yet he does not feel it impossible to remain a minister of the Free Church."

"Hadn't you better explain what vital principle means, Hepburn?" said Mr. Laing, with much seriousness.

"Oh, come!" exclaimed Mr. Watson, "we are not here to discuss questions of vital principle, but of this particular hymn book business. Of course you know, Mr. Hepburn, that personally Mr. Cruickshanks and myself are opposed to the innovation. But, as members of the kirk session, we are bound to act, in some measure, as representatives of the congregation. In short, what we want to know is, what line of action you would be disposed to adopt whenever consideration of the question is forced upon us?"

"That is just what I cannot tell you, Mr. Watson. I am minister, remember, of the whole congregation, not of any one part therein. In all cases where no vital principle is at stake, I hold a minister bound entirely to set aside all personal feelings, and so to act that all members of his congregation may feel sure of his full sympathy and respect

for their wishes and feelings even when they may chance to hold different sentiments from his own."

"An amount of self-abnegation I should hold to be rare," said Mr. Cruickshanks, with a perceptible sneer; but his eyes shifted uneasily under the glance he drew upon himself.

"So rare as to be practically non-existent, Mr. Cruickshanks;" and the minister's tone was grave even to sternness. "The man who should attain to total extinction of self would have few virtues left to struggle for. None the less are we bound to aim at it to the utmost of our ability. If we ministers attained more generally nearer to that blessed goal, there would be far fewer schisms, wranglings, and unseemly disputes in the Church. Each man fighting for his own preferences or prejudices, and calling them vital principles which he is bound to maintain, is the source of most of our troubles. Ministers cannot expect to improve this state of things by preaching, unless they also add the silent teaching of example."

"Hang it, Cruickshanks," said Mr. Watson, who was a good man of business; "I wish you would let us keep to the point, and not keep leading off to general discussions. If you want a sermon all to yourself, I daresay Mr. Hepburn will give you a private interview. What we want now is to settle what course is to be followed where ever this hymn book question is forced upon us."

"True," said Mr. Laing, looking at his watch. "We had better be getting on. I have a business appointment at ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

"I am afraid," said Mr. Hepburn, with a smile, "you want to get on to a point which I warn you you will not reach. I mean a definite statement of opinion, I should call it partizanship on my own part. That I cannot give you. I cannot even form a resolution myself, as to the

course I shall follow, until I see what tone and temper pervades the congregation in dealing with this matter. I can very candidly express a wish that it had not been likely to come forward at this particular moment. Beyond that I can say nothing."

"Shall I again expose myself to the displeasure of Mr. Watson," said Mr. Cruickshanks, "if I venture to ask what reason Mr. Hepburn has for that wish? Such a wish, if well grounded, might be made use of to bring about the result desired."

"It would be a somewhat unusual instance of congregational procedure if it did," put in Mr. Laing.

Mr. Hepburn shook his head at him. "You are incorrigible," he said. "No, Mr. Cruickshanks, I do not think there is any such chance. My wish arises solely from the feeling that every change to some extent unsettles a congregation, and that having had one lately it would have been better to defer another for a time."

There was not much more, after Mr. Hepburn's very distinct statement of his determination, which could be said. On that point, at least, Mr. Cruickshanks could not say the trumpet gave an uncertain sound. After a little more desultory conversation, the deputation retired.

"Well," said Mr. Watson, as they walked away, "we havn't taken much by that move. It seems to me our minister always contrives to give a most unpleasant turn to any discussion of the sort. I confess I don't like that sort of aiming at the impossible being hurled at me. Let a man try to do what he can do, not what he can't. That's my idea."

"There is some advantage in professing a very high standard in principle," said Mr. Cruickshanks. "It covers a lot of failures in action."

“Faith, it’ll have to be broad and long, and thick in the case of most of us, then,” said Mr. Laing, “for it’ll have a deal to cover. But I can’t agree with you, Watson, that we have taken nothing by our move. We’ve got as clear a statement of Mr. Hepburn’s views as we could possibly expect. He said from the very first he would be the minister of the whole congregation, not of any one party, and if you’d only kept that in mind, you might have predicted very certainly what line he would take now, without the trouble of interviewing him.”

“Of course; if you accept that formula. I don’t. I don’t like old practices turning up with fine new-fangled names. If a man means to be a trimmer, let him say so at once, and not call it by a fine name, and set up for being more virtuous than other people. Mr. Hepburn will make Mossgiel too hot to hold him before very long, I doubt.”

“Or himself too hot for Mossgiel to hold.”

“Oh, if you like it that way. I can’t say I see much difference.”

“There is a difference, all the same.”

And Mr. Cruickshanks thought he understood Mr. Laing’s meaning; and the remark came often back to his mind, arousing uneasy sensations.

CHAPTER XII.

A CLUE AND A REVELATION.

MR. HEPBURN, disregarding sentimental considerations, had exchanged the trusty pony which had saved his life for a horse more suited to the saddle; and one day, a few weeks later, as he was riding in the neighbourhood of Strathellon, he was overtaken by Lady Ellinor Farquharson, also on horseback.

"A fortunate encounter," she said, as she greeted him "I wanted to speak to you."

"I am all attention," he replied, striving at the same time, covertly to question her face. It was the first time he had seen her very close since that visit of Mr. Laing's, after the ball, and she had been often in his thoughts. He could read nothing, however. A certain wistful look there was in her eyes, a look which may mean mystic enthusiasm, unsatisfied aspirations, some hidden spring of sorrow, but which always means that the present life is not an overflowing cup of bliss. But then that look was always there, so there was nothing to be read in that, and otherwise the lovely face was bright and sunny as ever.

"I want to know if you think dancing very wicked?"

"Dancing wicked," he repeated in a puzzled tone. "Why on earth should you put that question to a hermit lately come forth from the wilderness? What should I know about such matters? I declare I don't think I have seen dancing—such at least as you have in your thoughts—since I was a boy at college."

"I thought all clergymen were supposed to have decided opinions on such points."

"I am afraid a good many feel, or think themselves bound to express them at any rate. I suppose there might be something found to say for and against all amusements. But what made you ask me the question?"

"We will come to that presently, after you have answered another question, which, being one of fact, you will find easier. Have you made any progress toward finding out who is the object of your volcanic ne'er-do-weel's homicidal hatred?"

"No, the slightest. In truth, I have of late, given very little thought to the subject, for he has gone away."

"Yes; but to return."

"Oh, yes, he is coming back. But so long as he is safely afar, I do not feel myself bound to turn my thoughts to what is really a very annoying subject to me."

"A hint to me to hold my tongue."

"Not at all. I am full of curiosity to know what can be the possible connection, which your words seem to imply, between this question and the moral aspects of the occupation of dancing."

"A nearer one than you might think. Are you too much of a recluse to be aware that a ball is oftentimes a wondrous revealer of hidden sentiments?"

It was only by an effort he prevented a perceptible start. Was it bravado? Was she really unconscious? or was she merely trying to find out the extent of his knowledge? The question was answered instantly. She started herself, and a sudden rush of colour dyed her face crimson, then, fading as suddenly, left her very pale.

James Hepburn was no highly polished courtier, but he knew perfectly well what to do. He neither touched his

horse with the spur nor became absorbed in his stirrup irons, nor perpetrated any of those blundering manœuvres whereby maladroit people emphasize their perception of an awkward situation. He simply preserved a perfectly unconcerned air, and instantly replied.

"I imagine any crowd is that. I don't suppose there is anything like a crowd of any sort for betraying what people's true characters and dispositions are. Still I am as much as ever in the dark as to the mysterious connection of ideas, in this particular case."

She had perfectly recovered herself in a moment, and answered at once, laughing,

"I shall have to ramble still further afield in order to explain that. You must know, that as in duty bound, we have a ball always about Christmas for the servants. Now it so happens that we shall not be at home this year at Christmas. We are going to my father's a week before then, and afterwards to the south of England for some time. Therefore the ball this year is to be considerably antedated, and will, in fact, take place in about a fortnight. The servants have *carte blanche*—within certain limits of course—to ask whomsoever they please, and I know your housekeeper and her frolicsome niece will be among the number. General Farquharson and I were talking over the matter this morning, and I think the same idea occurred to both of us—that if you would come yourself you might chance to light upon a clue through watching the proceedings of the damsel herself. The whole of the out-door Strathellon establishment will of course be there."

"I think the idea an admirable one. I will certainly come, and postpone the decision on the morality of dancing until afterwards."

"Then come to dinner, and help the poor dear General

to bear up with fortitude. I am scouring the country for dancing men. We are still doing popularity, you know. I must have some pretty girls too ; some nice ones who will dance with the keepers without looking condescending. Unfortunately my two young sisters cannot come, or they would be a host in themselves."

"The Miss Chamberlaynes ?"

She gave her head a little impatient shake. "They have come out too lately. If they danced with the butler they would not be able to avoid showing they remembered he had been waiting at dinner. I am better off for me. My two brothers and Sir Maurice Adair will go a long way."

"I thought Sir Maurice was in England ?"

"He will be back by then." He thought the answer was a little short in tone, that was all ; and then, seeing that he was checking his horse at the turning which led to Strathellon, she added, "Are you not coming to luncheon ?"

"Not to-day thanks. I must get home."

Then, with a friendly salutation, she rode away.

The suggestion was certainly an excellent one, he thought. He would not be expected to take any active share in the proceedings. From the vantage ground of a mere looker on he might do a good deal more than merely watch coquettish Mary Warrender. Not the most insatiable gossip in all the country round thirsted more eagerly for information regarding Lady Ellinor than did he, in his pure admiration and unselfish devotion. Let him only feel certain that the point was reached when interference was the only chance of safety, and a weapon not more likely to wound than protect those in whose behalf it was wielded, and he would interfere to some purpose.

Two days before the ball he spoke to Mrs. Findlay on the subject.

"Scott can drive me over in time for dinner," he said, "and then you and Mary can have the cart for the evening. I will walk home."

"Ye're vera kind, sir, I'm sure. But I'm no sure that Mary and me'll be going after all."

"Not going?"

"Maybe no. Rob Blackwood's come hame."

"When?"

"Twa nights syne. I doubt he'll be at the ball, and then I'd as soon Mary bided at hame."

"I should think he is most unlikely to be there. But at any rate it will be great impertinence to General and Lady Ellinor Farquharson if you stay away now, for no better reason than that. What makes you think Blackwood will be there?"

"Just to get a chance of makin' up to Mary."

"He can't go unless he is asked, and I am pretty sure that will not be allowed. However, you must go anyway, so get all your finery ready."

There was a large party assembled when he reached Strathellon, and soon after his entrance Lady Ellinor came across to him.

"An unfortunate thing has happened," she said.

"What?"

"Blackwood is to be here. It is a piece of stupidity of one of the watchers, who is, I fancy, in some way related to him. We are much annoyed, but General Farquharson says he does not know enough against him to let him think himself justified in taking so strong a measure as ordering the invitation to be cancelled. He thinks it would be casting an unjust stigma on the man. Had we known in time we would of course have stopped it. I feel rather nervous. I hope he won't bring loaded pistols in his pockets."

"Oh, no. I do not think he will do anything outrageous here. His presence may, after all, aid my purpose."

None the less he sought out Mary Warrender when the ball was about to begin, and gave her a strong warning, adding, with characteristic bluntness—

"Flirt I suppose you must and will, but for any sake don't flirt especially with any one person. He can't blow out the brains of a dozen men at once," he added to himself. "A plurality of blockheads may save the whole lot."

He could not but allow that Mary Warrender fully carried out his conditional admonition. She was not only very pretty, she was a good dancer, and had a quick tongue, and was in great request. But her smiles were bestowed with judicious impartiality. Now it was Randolph Forbes, or Sir Maurice Adair, then a groom, keeper, or footman. The most jealous of lovers could not have concentrated himself. Blackwood danced very little, and wore a lowering expression.

Neither was there anything to be observed on the other score. Lady Ellinor and Sir Maurice were both doing their duty in a way that kept them almost wholly apart. Beyond an occasional smiling remark, as they came across each other, hardly a word passed between them.

Mr. Hepburn was getting rather tired of the whole thing, and was leaning against a window frame, meritoriously suppressing a strong inclination to yawn, when General Farquharson came up, and yawned undisguisedly.

"Not much more in your way than mine, Mr. Hepburn," he said. "We don't seem likely, after all, to have murder for a change. What do you make out?"

"Nothing; save that there seems to be safety in numbers."

"For the numbers, yes. But how about the girl? She

is a most outrageous little flirt. Judging from some of my Indian reminiscences, I should say she was far from safe."

Hardly waiting for a reply, he moved away to speak to some one else, and in a few moments one of the Chamberlaynes took his place beside the minister.

"You've the advantage of us all, Mr. Hepburn," he said, "I would give something to be as cool as you look." Before the minister had time to reply, the young man gave a sudden start, and looking past him, said in a low voice, "Good Heavens, who is that? If ever I saw murder written on a human face?"

James Hepburn glanced hastily around. Robert Blackwood was leaning against the door post in the open doorway, with his arms folded; and the minister knew that the object of his hatred and suspicion was in the room, and within a narrow radius, in what part of it. There was, verily, as the young man had said, murder in his glance, and that glance of deadly concentrated hate was fixed upon a group standing near the other end of the room. But then unfortunately it was a group. Lady Ellinor's two brothers, Sir Maurice Adair, the house steward, the head keeper, and one or two other retainers, were standing in a close knot discussing some projected diversion. Mary Warrender was sitting at some distance talking to another girl. Mr. Hepburn would have staked any thing on the fact that one of that group was the man whose identity he was so anxious to establish. But which? He was no nearer a discovery of any practical benefit than before.

"Who is he? What does it mean?" asked the younger man, after a moment's silent watching.

"Only that he is a jealous lover. He happens to be a suitor of that frisky damsel you were dancing with last, and he is not quite on sure ground."

“Good Lord, I’ll mind I don’t dance with her again. I shall go and warn the Forbeses and Adair. She must be left to the married men. We shall find ourselves minus our brains, before we know where we are.”

Blackwood caught Mr. Hepburn’s eye at the moment, and turning suddenly on his heel, walked out of the room. The minister’s resolution was taken instantly, and he followed him. Blackwood was putting on his coat and hat.

“Are you going home, Blackwood?” he asked.

“Ay, I’m for awa, sir; I’ve had eneuch o’ this. I dinna weel ken why I was sic a fule as to come.”

“I am going also. I’ll walk back to Mossgiel with you.

“Are ye walkin’, sir?”

“Yes. I am going to leave the trap for Scott to drive Mrs. Findlay and Mary home.”

“Weel, I’ll be proud to walk wi’ ye’ sir, if ye wish it. But ye maun hae small regard for yer character, I’m thinkin’, if ye’ve a mind to be seen walkin’ wi’ me, weel on to twa hours after midnight.”

“If my character is so fragile as that, it must be well into fragments already,” answered the minister, laughing as he put on his hat and coat, and leaving a message for Lady Ellinor, which he knew she would understand, set off home, in company with Blackwood; not sorry to leave, but pretty well satisfied by the mere fact of Blackwood’s readiness to accompany him, that his vigilance was unnecessary, in this instance at least.

“Do ye care sae little about yer character then, sir,” Blackwood said, after a short silence, as they walked together down the drive.

“God forbid!” exclaimed Mr. Hepburn. “I never meant that. No man is free from frailty, but I would cut off my right hand before I would voluntarily do a thing

calculated to bring discredit on my profession. But as for heeding the moral swine that are for ever routing in the mire for garbage, I should never dream of such a thing."

Blackwood again relapsed into silence for a brief space. Then he said,—

"Maybe then, sir, ye'll no greatly care for what I've had in my mind, whiles, to tell ye."

"Tell me what it is, and then I can tell you. I am very sure, Blackwood, that anything you say or do on my account will be out of a hearty desire to do me service."

"Ay, ye're richt there, sir. I was no that dazed the nicht ye dirled my heid sae sair for me, but that I heard ye ca' me 'brither,' an' nae in the way ministers are aye sayin' 'dear brethren' frae the pulpit, wi' nae mair meanin' than a parrot's chatter. I've ne'er forgot it. I'll tell ye what I was thinkin' to tell ye, an' if ye're no pleased, ye'll believe I had a gude intent, an' look ower the offence."

"You may trust me for that."

"Weel, sir, I doubt ye'll likely ken that syne ye got Leddy Ellinor to visit Thompson's, she's been whiles down about there, an' she's been to see ither folk that was in trouble forbye the Thompson's."

"Yes, I know that."

"She's a gude, kind-hearted leddy, there's nae twa words aboot that. An' she's nae like the leddies, at least the maist o' them, in the town; that condescendin' that ye'd think they were aye frichted pair folk might come to think they were made o' like flesh and blude. They a' say ye can see that she's nae thinkin' o' hersel' ava, but just fu' o' kind thochts for them that's in sorrow. An' of course there's been a deal o' talk about her."

"Of course," replied Mr. Hepburn, with an invisible frown in the darkness. He thought he knew what was coming.

“For a’ they think sae muckle o’ her, they canna resist a bit gossip; but it isn’t they who set it goin’. But what wi’ the leddies chatterin’, an’ the servants, an’ the shops, a’ the clash gangs clean through the town, first or last. An’ there’s a deal o’ chatterin’ the noo about Leddy Ellinor an’ yersel’, sir.”

Mr. Hepburn gave a sort of gasp, and stopped dead. “About Lady Ellinor and me,” he repeated.

“Ay, sir, I thocht ye didna ken it; and that it wad be weel ye sud. Ye see, sir, I ken weel mysel’ what it is to get a bad name for nae gude cause, an’ hoo everything turns against ye then, an’ I did think ye micht like to be on yer guard. A minister’s nae just the same as ither men. Of course ye’ll ken, sir, naeboddy’s thocht to say there’s aught wrang; but they say she’s that glakit, she’ll just play wi’ ony man, like a cat wi’ a mouse, an’ that she’s amused at the thocht o’ turnin’ a minister’s heid; an’ that ye’re just bewitched wi’ her beautiful face an’ pretty ways, an’ in a fair way to lose yer heid a’thegither.”

Mr. Hepburn walked on in silence, and Blackwood, with that sort of tact which nature sometimes bestows, after a moment’s pause, continued speaking.

“I doubt ye see, sir, the maist o’ the leddies in the town are like enech to gang aff their heids themselves wi’ jealousy o’ Leddy Ellinor, in a sort o’ general way, ye ken.”

“Why should they be?” asked the minister suddenly; “she is quite out of their way.”

“She’s no quite oot o’ sicht o’ their husbands, sir. Minister,”—and his voice suddenly changed, growing deep and tremulous in tone—“wad ye no lay down yer life to shield Leddy Ellinor frae ony harm?”

“Right gladly.” The answer came as though forced from him, whether he would or no.

"Sae wad I, an' sae wad money ane that I ken, that wad scarce daur to lift an eye to her as she passed. I doubt some o' they leddies in town hae a sort o' glimmerin' their husbands are somewhat in the same mind, an' they dinna tak kindly to the notion, which I'll no say is a surprisin' circumstance. I doubt that's why they're a' sae ready to rin her doon; an' I thocht I wad just mak' bold to tell ye what was said, that ye might be on yer guard. There's a hantle o' they toun folk hae nae great luve for ye, sir, an' I wad no like to think they could tak ye by surprise, sae ye'll just forgi'e my pittin' ye on yer guard, so that ye'll nae inadvertently do or say onything ye wadna care about if ye knew. An' noo I'll say gude nicht, sir. This is my nearest way hame."

He paused just at the entrance of a cross road on the outskirts of the town. Mr. Hepburn cordially grasped his hand.

"Good night, Blackwood, and thank you a thousand times. You have done me a real service, and I thank you most sincerely."

"There's nae need, sir. I'm proud ye're no offended wi' me for bein' sae bold."

With that he disappeared, and James Hepburn pursued his solitary way to the manse.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN UGLY ONSLAUGHT.

HE could not say that his somewhat unwonted action in going to a ball had not been pregnant of results ; and it need hardly be said that these results had not tended to mollify his general attitude towards society. He did not greatly trouble himself on Lady Ellinor Farquharson's account. She seemed to him to belong so completely to another sphere that he could not picture to himself the possibility of her atmosphere being even faintly stirred by Mossgiel gossip and scandal. But on what moral garbage must the souls be habitually fed which could thus soil with their noxious imaginings relations so perfectly simple and natural as Lady Ellinor's and his own, even though their evil suggestions went no further than coquetry on her part, and glamour on his? And these were the people whose views and opinions, on questions moral and religious, he was forced to treat with a certain deference—who listened critically when he preached, and fain would have had him preach “on approval,” in order that each one might listen judicially, decide upon his fitness for the ministry, and vote accordingly. Were they, by right, even within the pale of Christianity at all?

He pursued this train of thought until he found himself involuntarily recurring again and again to Blackwood's pungent remarks about their matrimonial anxieties with a certain grim satisfaction which his conscience condemned ; and he rose to retire in the early morning with a sigh, and

the admission that there is mud enough in the depths of any soul to render violent moral agitation unsafe, even though the exciting cause might be most righteous indignation.

Any thought of altering his conduct in any way where Lady Ellinor was in question formed no part of his meditations. How grave soever his fears for her might be, no woman ever lived who was more wholly free from the least trace of general coquetry. To act in any way as though such a vice could be possible to her would be an insult. Let the lovers of mud dabble in the mud of their own providing, he would only be on his guard against incautiously treating them as though they were healthful, cleanly souls, rejoicing in all that was honorable and of good report.

That was about the last thought with which he fell asleep, and hence it would appear that James Hepburn was not precisely the man to be popular in a country town. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth must speak, even though some trimming and shaping may take place in the process of transformation of thought into speech; and a minister who, in the secret recesses of his soul, pronounced many, at least, of the virtuous wives and spinsters of his congregation to be moral lovers of mud, would not be likely to frame his utterances in a manner wholly pleasing to them.

Neither was his mental attitude devoid of a certain oblique action. The impending hymn book disturbance lay heavy on his soul. Not that, personally, he very greatly cared whether his congregation uplifted their voices in psalm or hymn; but just because the question was, in itself, unimportant, so certainly would the wrangle over it be bitter and acrimonious; a successful sowing of a fruitful crop of heartburning and bad feeling. And though, in

actual fact, he would have to deal chiefly with the elders and deacons of his congregation, he knew very well to whose piping they would dance ; and felt that, in effect, this question had to be settled with those women who were maliciously spreading evil reports of a beautiful woman, whose real offence in their eyes was that she was too perilously attractive ; and who were seriously damaging or striving to damage his ministerial character.

At length, after much proposing and counter-proposing, a suggestion was made to him to convene a meeting of elders and deacons, to discuss the advisability of summoning a meeting of the whole congregation, and taking by vote a census of opinion on the proposed innovation. It was not with the most cordial feelings that he assented. His chivalry did not extend the length of feeling well pleased at a solemn assembly being convened, to further in reality the views of a set of gossip-loving women, though the strong self-discipline of a life time rendered it never a very difficult task to him to subordinate feeling entirely to the dictates of judgment. So a day was fixed, and summonses duly issued.

Meantime, however, the demon of discord had been busy working up circumstances, in no way connected with the subject in question, into an excellent chance of rendering that meeting a stormy one. There had long been a smouldering dispute between Mr. Cruickshanks and a neighbour about certain rights connected with the outhouses in a back yard to which both houses had access. This dispute had lately blazed out afresh. Mr. Cruickshanks had allowed Messrs. Ronald and Robson to store goods in one of these outhouses, since which, Mr. Gilmour affirmed, very doubtful characters had been constantly hanging about the place, and he had boldly challenged Mr. Cruickshanks' right to

the use of these outhouses. There had been several acrimonious discussions over the matter, and on the very day fixed for the meeting there had been an especially stormy one, in the course of which Mr. Gilmour had threatened to place the matter in legal hands, and to ask advice from Mr. Laing. This threat had resulted in Mr. Cruickshanks compromising the matter, on terms which he considered very unfair, and decidedly detrimental to his own interests. Under all his suavity there lay a remarkable aptitude for sometimes losing his temper, and, metaphorically, hitting out viciously; and when he set out for the meeting he was in a state of extreme irritability.

"Well, gentlemen," Mr. Hepburn said, when the party were all assembled, "Now that we are all here, I do not exactly know how we are going to proceed. This is neither a meeting of the kirk session, nor of the deacons' court. I do not know that we have any authority to deal in conglomerates."

"I take it the minister is always entitled to request the office-bearers to meet together for discussion in any case where he considers it desirable," said Mr. Watson.

"I'm quite agreeable to that, Mr. Watson," put in Mr. Rutherford, "an' I'm thinkin', if the minister wad just tak' the chair, an' proceed in a' things as if this was a meetin' of the kirk session, of course without enterin' ony minutes in the session book, it wad be the best course to pursue. There's nae doubt we've got a question comin' on that's made a deal o' wark an' unpleasantness in mony congregations, an' we thought if we could talk the matter over in this way, we'd maybe decide upon some course that might tend to preserve peace and harmony amongst us, an' that I'm sure is greatly to be wished."

"Most devoutly to be wished," said the minister, taking

the chair, in response to this speech, and a sort of silent movement of acquiescence among the rest of the assembly. "And the first suggestion I would make is that some one should state distinctly what it is we are going to discuss."

"Dear me, were you not informed?" said Mr. Cruickshanks, with a mild attempt to be sarcastic. "That is a strange oversight. The introduction of the hymn book is the question we are to consider."

"Doubtless. But that is a question that has a good many sides. We cannot consider them all at once. Where are you going to begin?"

"Oh this sort of skirmishing is no use," put in Mr. Watson, a little dictatorially. "The matter lies in a nut shell. A lot of empty-headed young people, who wouldn't mind having a brass band in the church by way of change, have set their minds on getting the hymn book introduced; and the question is, are we, the older and more experienced members, going to let them carry out their childish pranks unmolested? That's the way I look at it."

"These giddy young people have, at least, got so far as to force us to hold a meeting on the subject, Mr. Watson," said the minister. "That looks as if they carried some weight."

"Yes, Mr. Hepburn, and you'll excuse me if I say, it seems to me the weight they have, comes of their not being at once put down. I don't wish to say anything disrespectful to you, but I think if you had shown a little more firmness at the first, we should have had no trouble about the matter."

"It would be difficult for me to show firmness about a matter I have never had an opportunity of treating," replied the minister. "But I don't think you are putting your meaning quite plainly, Mr. Watson. What you want is,

that I should take a decided position, for or against, at once."

"Hear, hear," continued Mr. Cruickshanks, with much emphasis.

"And that," continued Mr. Hepburn, just turning his eyes upon him for a moment, "is what I will not do. I confess I regret this question having arisen at the present moment? A change of ministers must always, to some extent, unsettle a congregation, and I should have been glad if a longer interval had been allowed to pass before another question, on which it is hopeless to expect unanimity, had arisen. Your view of it, Mr. Watson, is, you must excuse me for saying, wholly untenable. A change of the sort proposed is sure to be welcome to the younger members of the congregation, but they are far from being the sole desirers of the introduction of the hymnal, or hymn book. And I tell you plainly, that it is quite inconsistent with my conceptions of ministerial responsibility to ally myself with one side or the other in a question of this sort. I have my own preferences, but I do not care even to state what they are. I hold myself bound entirely to set them aside. Supposing the question brought to the vote in the congregation, my action would simply be to abstain from voting at all; if, on either side the majority was a very narrow one, to use my utmost efforts to induce that majority to forget the use of their victory, rather than incur the risk of arousing that bitterness of feeling which is sure to spring up over a case of this sort, when parties are very nearly balanced. Were the majority a very large one, my endeavour then would be, to induce the minority to yield with a good grace, for the sake of peace, and in confidence that habit would render the change every day less distasteful to them!

"A very extraordinary view of ministerial responsibility,

it seems to me," said Mr. Watson. "A sort of stand-well-with-all-party notion."

There was a momentary flash in the minister's eye, but he answered with a smile, "For 'all,' substitute 'no,' and you will be nearer the mark. But I shall have to remind you, Mr. Watson, of your late judicious suggestion to Mr. Cruickshanks, about sticking to the point, and not introducing general questions."

Meantime, however, an elderly and extremely orthodox deacon had made some remark to Mr. Cruickshanks about Jesuitism, in an under tone. Mr. Cruickshanks' mental processes were not logical, perhaps, but they were not generally difficult to follow, and it was not perhaps surprising that he here put in with a rather sneering accent.

"Perhaps to substitute 'a policy of trimming' would be nearer the mark still."

A flush rose to Mr. Hepburn's face, but he answered quietly, "That is rather an offensive remark, Mr. Cruickshanks. You can hardly be so ignorant of the English language as not to be aware that a steady and open refusal to side with any party, is a policy the very reverse of any to which the term 'trimming' can fairly be applied."

It must be allowed, that though the words were spoken quietly enough, the intonation was not wholly devoid of a slight tinge of contempt. Mr. Cruickshanks replied with all his usual suavity of manner; but none the less did he contrive to infuse into it a considerable amount of covert insolence.

"I am sure I had no intention of being offensive, and I don't pretend to be a scholar. Of course, Mr. Hepburn has the advantage of us all, if he chooses to split straws over the strictly accurate meaning of words. Plain business men can only use them in the way they are generally used."

"You had better consult some of your nautical acquaintances then," said the minister. "They will soon correct your impressions respecting the meaning of the word 'trimming.'"

Nettled, as he undoubtedly was, by the insinuation, nothing was further from James Hepburn's thoughts than to retort with another insinuation, nor, at the moment, was there the slightest remembrance of Mr. Cruickshanks' suspected questionable dealings in his mind. But who shall predict where an irritated man will find offence, or an uneasy conscience or consciousness detect a hidden meaning? Moreover, in Mr. Cruickshanks' earlier experiences that day some sharp remarks had been dropped about seamen who were little better than smugglers. All his repressed irritability burst into a flame, and bringing his clenched fist down on the table with a violence which caused the whole assembly to start, he exclaimed—

"If that isn't an offensive remark, Mr. Hepburn, I don't know what is, seeing everyone knows that anyone who has nautical acquaintances in this town must be in the habit of associating with very indifferent characters—a practice, let me tell you, of which I have never been accused, or even suspected, as far as I know, not even to the length of dangling about after a painted Jezebel."

A momentary sensation of sincere gratitude for Robert Blackwood's timely warning flashed through Mr. Hepburn's mind. He was not taken off his guard. But ere he had time even to think how best to reply, Mr. Laing interposed with a hearty laugh, either genuine or remarkably well-feigned.

"Upon my word, Mr. Cruickshanks, that's a most unfortunate suggestion for you to make. You'll get hoist with your own petard, my good sir. I saw Gilmour this after

noon, and he seems not a little inclined to think you are anxious to play Ahab to his Naboth, in that backyard business."

"Oh yes," broke in Mr. Watson, who did not object to a little sparring, but was a sensible enough man under such circumstances as the present. "We're all more or less living in glass houses, in such a place as this. We should all carefully avoid throwing stones, even in jest."

"An' I think, sir," put in Mr. Rutherford, "we wad do weel to keep closer to business. Ye'll excuse me, gentlemen, if I say my time is rather valuable to me just the noo, I'll be glad to get through the business, an' get awa hame as soon as ye like."

"Amen to that," said Mr. Hepburn, laughing. "Ycu can abuse me for being a moderate at your leisure, afterwards. I have a terrible accumulation of study work to get through."

Thus this ugly phase of circumstances was tided over, and after a little more discussion, which probably the great peril thus happily surmounted helped to render more harmonious than might otherwise have been the case, and in which there was evinced a strong tendency altogether to ignore Mr. Cruickshanks, the only practical question bearing upon the subject was settled, by a resolution, that it would be advisable that the matter should be left as it stood until after the New Year, and that then, when the principal part of the congregation was pretty certain to be at home, a congregational meeting should be summoned, and votes taken on the subject.

Mr. Cruickshanks, with some hurried excuse about pressing engagements, left the room hastily, the moment the meeting was over. The remainder of the party followed more leisurely, some half dozen or more, whose course lay in

the same direction, accompanying the minister, and chatting a little too markedly perhaps on indifferent topics. One by one they dropped away, as their courses diverged, until at last, Mr. Hepburn and Mr. Laing were left together.

"That was an ugly hit, Hepburn," he said. "I fear you were taken rather off your guard."

"Yes, as far as time, place, and hitter goes, not otherwise. I would have given something just then to hit him back with the arm of flesh! I would have given him a worse blow than"—

"Than I gave Blackwood," he was on the point of saying; and the fact of finding himself so near such a slip, brought to him a keener perception of the extent of his own excitement and perturbation than he had before possessed.

"Than his tongue inflicted, I suppose. I do not doubt that. It was Cruickshanks all over. He is an ugly rascal to deal with. He has practised that soft insinuating manner of his until it has become so habitual that you may know him a long time before you find out what an infernally nasty temper he has underneath. Gilmour had hit him pretty hard about smugglers, and I saw he was in bad humour when he came. Of course he suspected you of intending an underhand thrust. I did not know, however, that you were aware of what had been said."

"I was not, until a short time since."

"Of course I had heard it," Mr. Laing said, "but I could not make up my mind whether to tell you or not. I hardly knew how you would take it."

"I think it is too ridiculous to be of much importance. If it would keep their prying eyes from straying in more dangerous directions, it might be an advantage. All the same, though, I am not sorry she is safely away for some months. I suppose that unlucky outburst of Cruickshanks' will set the whole place ringing with scandal again."

"You may take your oath of that; but I managed to spoil Cruickshanks's game for him. His wife isn't popular. She's a dressy, self-asserting sort of woman, with independent and unpopular opinions regarding the social status of wholesale and retail businesses. I'll be bound wherever his remark goes, mine will go along with it, and more than half turn the joke against himself."

"It was an excellent counter-thrust. But now, come in and smoke a cigar if you like, but for goodness sake talk of something else."

With a boding heart Mr. Watson returned to his, for the moment, deserted home. Mrs. Watson had gone to keep Mrs. Wylie company during her husband's absence at the meeting, the heterodox opinions of the Wylies on the hymnal question not having been found a bar to friendly intercourse in the case of people who possessed some social recommendations; and Mr. Watson had little doubt sundry other wives had done the same. From Mr. Wylie they would hear all that had passed, and as he remembered the dictatorial tone he had assumed, regarding the minister and Lady Ellinor, his spirits sank to a low level. She came at length, serenely triumphant. Still the triumph was unmis-
takable.

"Well, you seem to have had a nice sort of meeting?" she said.

"Well, yes," he answered, feebly entrenching himself in apparent literalness. "I think, on the whole, we came to the only conclusion."

"Oh, nonsense. I wasn't thinking about the hymn book. I hope William you're satisfied now. I hadn't found quite such a mare's nest as you chose to make out."

"Mare's nest or no mare's nest," exclaimed her husband impatiently, "I wish that ass Cruickshanks would keep his

temper, or stay at home. We were precious near having a very nasty scene, I can tell you. Should have had, I believe, but for Laing's quickness. By Jove, it was well done, and Hepburn kept his temper admirably under control, though I am mistaken if Cruickshanks was not nearer getting knocked down than he has often been. Would have served him right too, crusty blockhead!

"A nice account to give of a minister, thinking of knocking people down, indeed! For my part, I think Mr. Cruickshanks was quite right to show Mr. Hepburn that people can see through all the pretence of setting up such a high standard of a minister's duty. Such hypocrisy is sickening, and I must say I think it would have been more to the credit of you all if you had stood by Mr. Cruickshanks, and backed up what he said, instead of just smoothing it over, and helping Mr. Hepburn through."

Here Mr. Watson could smile benignantly. "Women are very apt to think they understand everything better than men. But a quarrel among men is a very different thing from a quarrel among women, and is a thing women do not always understand how to settle. Allow me to tell you, a very awkward business was never better tided over. I only hope more mischief may not come of it."

"More mischief will come of Mr. Hepburn's infatuation, you may be sure, especially now he feels he can count upon the sympathy of the elders and deacons. I always suspected that she painted," she continued in a reflective tone, "and Mrs. Wylie, who is a very good judge, says she is certain of it. But I wonder how Mr. Cruickshanks found it out?"

"Heard it from Jezebel, I suppose," said Mr. Watson with a laugh.

"Really, William, it is abominable of you to take up that vulgar joke of Mr. Laing's. I don't pretend to like Mrs.

Cruikshanks ; but she does not deserve to be spoken of in this way. She at anyrate does not paint."

"Faith, I should think not. Washing out is what she wants."

"Do not be personal. She cannot help having a high colour."

"No more than Lady Ellinor can help having a complexion which sets all you women mad with jealousy. That's about what it comes to. And now I'm off to bed, for I'm very tired."

He slipped out of the room and off to his dressing room before his wife had time to recover from the stunning effects of this impious suggestion, and thus got better out of a bad business than he had dared to hope.

CHAPTER XIV.

A RIOT OF TONGUES.

NEEDS it to tell how scandal held high festival in Moss-giel after that eventful evening? How women darkened the moral atmosphere with showers of adjectives, expressive of every possible phase of horror, indignation and dismay! How men, with less noisy declamation, gladdened each other's hearts, on chance occasions, by epigrammatic remarks, pointed by a glance, an intonation, or a gesture! There was pasturage in rank abundance for imaginations of every shade of moral dinginess; beginning with the mild, almost insipid flavour of a little mere thoughtlessness, and ending in the highly spiced seasoning of a scandalous divorce case. They talked until they talked themselves into the belief that they really believed all they said.

There was, however, a bitter drop in the full cup of delight, in that the minister's tall form moved about amidst the turmoil, either indifferent to, or unconscious of the riot going on in the moral elements. Now and again, when certain members of his congregation bore down upon him, a slightly stern set look would gather over his face, otherwise he made no sign.

"Does he know what is being said, that is the question?" remarked Mrs. Campbell, the young and pretty wife of a wealthy elderly wine merchant, entertaining a select circle of friends at tea, one afternoon, in reply to an indignant query from Miss Muir, as to how it was possible he had the courage to walk down the principal street in the town?

Mrs. Campbell had married for money, with a vivid perception of the advantages money could confer, and a somewhat hazy view of any other question concerned. She had been the beauty of a garrison town, and found Mossgiel tedious, as also that a sober-minded elderly husband was a far heavier piece of ballast to which to attach yourself, than in her girlish inexperience she had supposed. The Campbells did not belong to the Free Church, but Mrs. Campbell had begun greatly to wish that they did. A clerical Don Juan appeared to her imagination a most novel and highly interesting piece of masculine machinery.

"He must know," replied Miss Muir, "no one is talking about anything else."

"Out of his hearing! Yes. But do you suppose people do the same in his hearing? I have some doubts on that point."

"You may well have," chimed in Mrs. Haigg, "I always suspected he had a violent temper, and you hear what Mrs. Watson says; how he almost struck Mr. Cruickshanks at the meeting."

"Gracious me, Mrs. Haigg," exclaimed Mrs. Watson, "I never said any such thing."

"Well, I am sure it was something very like it. I know I would not like to tell him what people are saying, though, if he does not know it, I think it is a great pity. If I ever speak to him again, which I shall certainly not do if I can avoid it, I shall keep very clear of the subject. A man who makes such a high profession, and then contrives to lay himself open to two disgraceful imputations by the time he has been a year in a place, would stop at nothing, I should think."

"Why, what are you saying, Mrs. Haigg?" interposed Mrs. Lorrimer, who naturally took a dispassionate view of

the case, and who was very partial to Mr. Hepburn. "Two disgraceful imputations! I never heard of even one, with any foundation."

"I daresay not, Mrs. Lorrimer; not being one of the congregation you probably do not hear all that they do."

"But two," exclaimed Mrs. Campbell. "I never heard of a thing being brought against Mr. Hepburn, except this being bewitched by Lady Ellinor Farquharson. Do tell us what you mean Mrs. Haigg."

"Oh, no, thank you, I have no wish to get myself into an action for libel, and I should think that Mr. Hepburn could be horribly vindictive. But when, on a not very dark night, and with a very quiet horse, a man knocks another down in the middle of the road, without seeing him, I don't require to be told what is the most likely explanation. Do you, Mrs. Watson?"

Mrs. Watson compressed her lips, and shook her head with a volume of mysterious expression. "I must say," she replied, "I think it is all very well to say poor Mr. Cruickshanks lost his temper; but for my part I consider he must have kept it remarkably well, or he could have said a great deal more."

"Merciful powers," exclaimed Mrs. Campbell, "what a delightfully wicked minister you have got. I shall live in a state of delicious excitement, expecting every day to hear of some dreadful catastrophe."

"Don't say such a thing," put in Miss Muir. "It sounds like a sort of omen. People are saying it is a good thing Lady Ellinor Farquharson is gone away for a time; but indeed I am not sure that it is. She at least is away from the town, and not one of the congregation. Things might be worse."

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, however,

in gossip, as well as in other things, and not even Miss Muir's gloomy portentous forebodings could be accepted as full indemnification for the satisfaction which would have been derived from watching Lady Ellinor and the minister. To Mrs. Campbell, not behind most women of her class in a craving for notoriety, the idea soon presented itself of finding some indemnification for this deprivation, and at the same time of achieving fame, by twitting Mr. Hepburn with his hopeless passion, and reputation for gallantry. It was quite clear to her that every one else was afraid to do so. "Did you hear what Mrs. Campbell did? I could not have believed any woman could have had the audacity." "By Jove, Campbell, your wife is the most courageous woman I ever heard of." These were the things she pictured to herself being repeated about Mossgiel, and in default of anything better, even this amount of fame seemed to be worth an effort to secure.

It was not immediately that fortune favoured her enterprise. The minister manifested a tantalizing ingenuity in coming across her just under the wrong conditions for her attempt. But at length she chanced to meet him rather suddenly at the corner of a street, and at once assuming an air of playful consternation, she exclaimed—

"Oh, Mr. Hepburn, I am quite afraid to be seen speaking to you."

Mr. Hepburn looked down upon her with a smile of benevolent toleration. If he had ever catalogued her at all, it was as a pretty empty-headed little woman, whom it was passing strange that a man of her husband's age and disposition should ever have dreamed of placing in a position enabling her to harrass him daily with wearisome trivialities. He replied, with just a shade of sarcasm in his tone—

"Are you? I should not have expected to find you so timorous."

She winced slightly, but answered gaily, "It is very serious. If my husband were to see me he would beat me with a big stick."

"Let us hope then, he is safely afar."

"Oh, yes, he is safe enough in his office. But other people might see me, and then what would become of my character? You dangerous man!"

A slight contraction of the brow was all that betrayed the minister's dawning perception of her drift, as he replied gravely—

"I am sorry you place yourself in the category of those whose characters are so fragile as to be likely to suffer injury through speaking to anyone for a moment in the public street."

"What an ungallant speech, not worthy of you. I am sure my character is excellent; a slight inclination to gadding about and chattering excepted," retorted Mrs. Campbell, who did not feel that she was getting on.

"Let me then recommend to you the apostolic injunction to young women to be keepers at home."

"And not be adorned, I suppose, with plaiting of hair, and wearing of gold, and, shall we say"—and she looked up at him with an affected air of hidden meaning—"putting on of paint."

She shrank before the glance she encountered—one which in a bad man would have been bold and insolent; in James Hepburn it was simply cold and hard, but his manner was gravely courteous.

"I should certainly not have suspected you of using paint, Mrs. Campbell. I most strongly advise you to discontinue the practice. It is, I am sure, as degrading to the moral character as it is injurious to the physical health. Good morning."

Slightly raising his hat, he was gone before she had time, even could she have found words, to reply. Fame did not blow her trumpet in Mossgiel on Mrs. Campbell's account. That interview remained wholly unreported. But Mrs. Campbell's varying colour, whenever she met Mr. Hepburn for some time afterwards, fully acquitted her of all suspicion on the subject of her complexion.

Mr. Cruickshanks had gone home from the meeting cursing his own folly for losing his temper. He had great faith in the beneficial results of his own suavity—his tact, as he called it—and was convinced that a man who lost his temper, and said sharp things, invariably did himself more mischief than he did anyone else. He was not without grounds for his opinion. The cold sneers which he was prone to utter in his blandest tones had often irritated antagonists into incautious outbursts which he had known how to use to his own advantage. Being an elder, he was not slow to expect to receive the same measure he meted to others. He kept himself very invisible for the next few days, fully expecting to be called upon to make some sort of reparation or apology.

That proposition had been brought forward.

"We ought to do something," Mr. Watson said to Mr. Laing. "The thing ought not to be allowed to pass unnoticed."

"I don't see what can be done that would not produce more harm than good. However, get two or three of the most sensible of those who were present to come with you to my house one evening, and we will talk the matter over."

This irregular sort of meeting was accordingly held, unknown to either the minister or Mr. Cruickshanks, and quite unsuspected by watchful wives. Mr. Rutherford spoke in great excitement—

"It's just the maist disgracefu' attack on a minister I

ever heard. An' though we're no just a regular meeting, I would beg to move that Mr. Cruickshanks be required to apologize, or resign the eldership."

"Yes," said Mr. Watson, "I think that is the least we can do. Quite apart from all question of truth or falsehood, the time and circumstances rendered such an attack a most blackguard proceeding. I most gladly second Mr. Rutherford's motion."

"Stop a bit," put in Mr. Laing, "you are going too fast. You can't move in the matter without doing more harm than good."

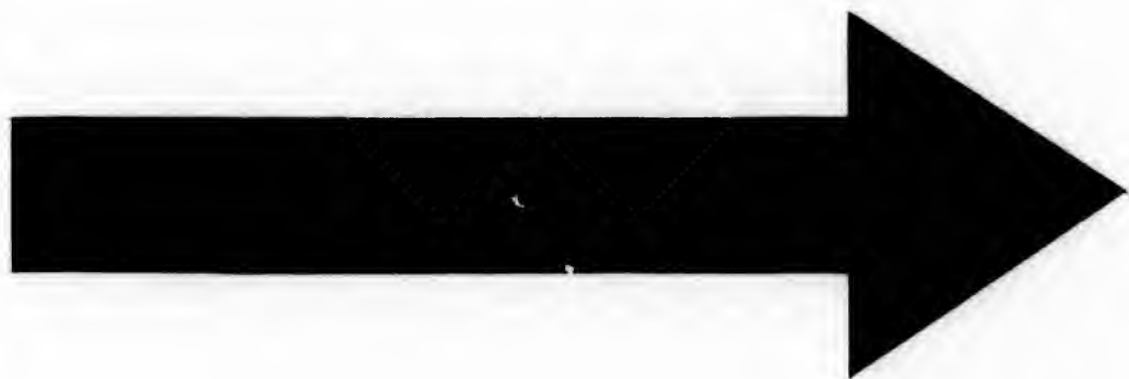
"I don't see that," said Mr. Watson.

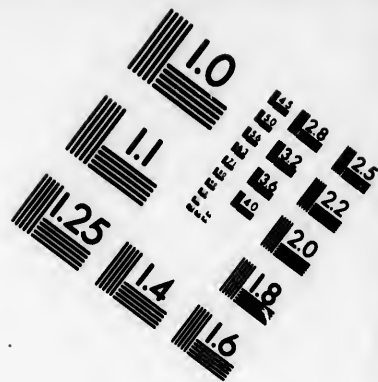
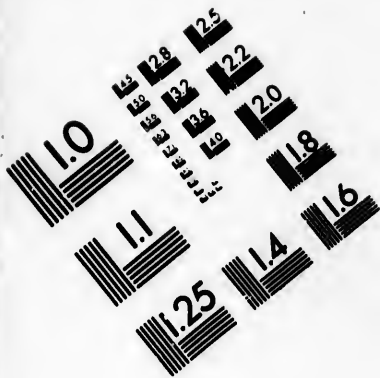
"My dear fellow, don't you see, though no names were actually mentioned, we've got a woman's name for all that mixed up in the business. When that is the case always let a scandal drop if you possibly can. I know Hepburn's sentiments well, and I know by taking the least step in the matter you will only cause him extreme annoyance."

"But we ought to get rid of Cruickshanks," remonstrated Mr. Watson. "A fellow capable of such conduct ought not to be an elder. We can't get rid of him if we take no notice of the matter."

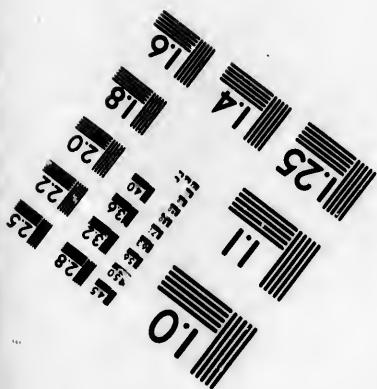
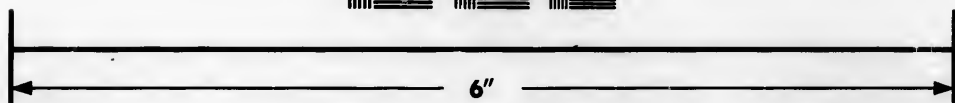
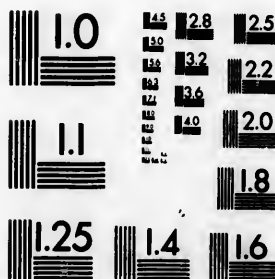
"Leave him alone. He'll get himself into trouble one of these days, or I'm much mistaken. Then we shall get rid of him. No one would be better pleased than I should to see him come to grief, but not at the cost of any further annoyance to Hepburn."

Mr. Laing won at last a reluctant acquiescence in his view of the question, granted far more in the conviction of his perfect acquaintance with Mr. Hepburn's feelings, which it would be most ungracious to disregard, than in much heed of the more chivalrous argument he had put forward, and thus the matter was allowed to rest.





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Then, after a few days' waiting, Mr. Cruickshanks began to realize his good fortune, and to see how to turn a candid admission of his error to good account. He had naturally discussed the matter confidentially with Mrs. Watson, receiving that estimable woman's sympathy, and assurances of her regret that Mr. Watson had not taken a different view of the matter.

"I was wrong," he said, "very wrong. That I candidly allow. I hope I am the last man to refuse to acknowledge a fault. I was annoyed at myself afterwards, for though I had had much during the day to try me, I could not have believed momentary anger at an insinuation, not quite perceptible to the other gentlemen present, could have thrown me so completely off my guard. In fact, so unpardonable do I feel my own conduct to have been, that I confess I am amazed, indeed startled, that I have never been called upon to apologize. There were many gentlemen present, notably, my dear madam, your esteemed husband, who would not have been slow to resent an unmerited insult to a minister; and if the accusation was untrue, it was a gross insult. How am I to understand the fact of no explanation or apology being claimed?"

"True, quite true," replied Mrs. Watson. "There is no explanation, save that there was too much truth in your words to let it be advisable to take any notice of them. Well, Mr. Cruickshanks, of one thing you may be certain, you have the sympathy and cordial goodwill of a great many more people in Mossiel than you are aware."

Mr. Cruickshanks made his acknowledgments with such a charming mixture of honied sweetness and respectful deference, that Mrs. Watson, half an hour afterwards, was remarking to Mrs. Campbell that it was a thousand pities he "kept a shop." That his manner was really so good,

and be talked so well, he would positively be quite an acquisition sometimes at a dinner party.

"My dear Mrs. Watson," exclaimed Mrs. Campbell, "you must not think of such a thing. I have nothing to say against the man; but in these levelling days we must be careful. My mother was a most liberal person, but she always drew the line at retail traders. I have always drawn the line there myself. We must stop somewhere."

"Oh, yes, I know it would not do," sighed Mrs. Watson, "We are all bound to remember our duty to society. Still, it is a pity."

This little personal episode between minister and elder, coupled with the innocent Machiavellianism of James Hepburn's steady refusal to express an opinion, or even declare the nature of his admitted preference, played no unimportant part in the great hymnal agitation of the next few weeks. In Mossgiel, as elsewhere, it was a turbulent, noisy few, uneasily conscious that by no other means could they make themselves of any importance, who lashed into foam the surface of things by industrious threshing, and then loudly proclaimed that the fountains of the great deep were broken up. Such a party is pretty sure to be inimical to any minister whose personal qualities give him weight, and the agitators of the Free Church in Mossgiel were just the party who did not like their minister. He had various habits which were irritating to them, such as presupposing some little superficial acquaintance with the current literary, artistic, or scientific topics of the day, and carrying conversation off in directions which doomed them to the insignificance of silence. But, worst of all, he possessed some private fortune, a defect hard to bear with in the minister of a free and independent congregation.

To have carried the hymnal question in opposition to his

views by a judicious use of the scourge of his "pleasant vices" would have been wholesome medicine for him—a pious satisfaction to orthodox souls. But then, what were his views? He kept that secret closely locked in his own bosom, and thus paralyzed the right hand of the foe. Some of the most energetic of the agitators on both sides were nearly as anxious to show him—to use their own phrase—that he was not quite so important a person as he considered himself as to carry their point, and felt that their victory would lose half its charm did it turn out that it was his victory also. The possibility hung like a dead weight upon their energy, and crippled their efforts in the most disastrous manner.

When, therefore, the time for the congregational meeting arrived, it soon became evident that the edifying spectacle of a Christian congregation rending one another with uncompromising ardour, on account of a very small difference of opinion, was not to be presented to the gaze of outsiders. Mr. Cruickshanks had been unpleasantly subdued by some disagreeably candid remarks on the desirability of keeping his temper; because, "that sort of thing is monstrously unpleasant for us all, you know, and we shall not stand many repetitions." Mrs. Watson, who would have loyally seconded him, had been somewhat promptly dealt with. There is oftentimes fully as much laziness as weakness in marital submission, and on this subject Mr. Watson had been firm, and had spoken in a tone which his wife very well understood.

"You can give your vote, but I will not have you take any prominent part in the affair. Of course, we vote against the hymn-book, and for all he professes to keep in the background, everyone knows Cruickshanks is the real leader of the opposition. I am by no means quite satisfied about that

gentleman, and I do not choose that my wife should seem to be specially associated with him."

"My dear William, how can you say such things? I am sure he is a most worthy, estimable man! What do you know against him?"

"That's neither here nor there. I never said I knew anything against him. You are quite welcome to your opinion, so long as you do not publicly associate yourself with him."

"Well, I am sure I think the whole place has grown very fond of scandal, all of a sudden."

"I believe you are right there. Since you women industriously kept that nonsense going about Hepburn and Lady Ellinor, the whole town has seemed to be a hot-bed of scandal."

"I wonder to hear you talk such nonsense, William."

"Perhaps. But meantime you had better get ready, or you will be too late, perhaps, to vote at all."

In this way all the explosive elements reached the church in a depressingly damp state. They might sputter or smoke, but it was quite clear that there was little chance of infusion of energy into the proceedings, through the exciting influence of any startling display of rhetorical or other fire works. When at last the question was put to the vote, the minister and elders looked at each other in some surprise. The show of hands, on either side, was very small, compared with the numbers present.

The tellers reported that the noes had it, but Mr. Hepburn rose at once.

"I think you will all agree that it is impossible we should accept this decision as expressive of the wishes of the congregation. But a fraction of those present have voted at all. It seems to me that there is some other resolution which the majority are anxious to hear proposed."

There was a subdued murmur and rustle, and a little whispering, and a drawing together of heads, in one or two quarters, as if for consultation. But after a space of patient waiting, nothing seemed to come of it.

"Amazingly chilly moral atmosphere this," said Mr. Laing, under his breath, to the minister. "It is really remarkable how hard it is to get people to be energetic about anything save a quarrel. The burning question seems to have gone out all of a sudden, and left nothing but cool ashes. Eh! What?"

This in answer to a gentle pull of the coat-sleeve from Mr. Rutherford, with whom he then held a few moments' whispered conference, which Mr. Rutherford ended by saying aloud—

"Na, na, sir, ye're a better speaker than me, just say it yersel'!"

Thus urged Mr. Laing rose—"I have been asked," he said, "to move that what seems to me a very sensible proposal to put to the vote. It is very clear that, for some reason, the present moment is not auspicious for settling the question of the proposed change. I would, therefore, suggest that the question be put—Shall this meeting be adjourned to this day six months?"

"Put it *sine die*," said Mr. Watson.

"That's giving it to the noes. We could have done that at first," retorted Mr. Laing.

Half-a-dozen supporters had jumped up to second the resolution, and a sort of stir passed over the assembly—that kind of movement which indicates that a crisis is over, and people are breathing freely once more.

Without the amendment the question was put, and there was little need to count hands. The wish of the majority, by whatever motive prompted, was abundantly demon-

strated. The great hymnal question had proved a veritable mountain in labour, and had brought forth the insignificant mouse of an adjournment to that day six months. After achieving this magnificent result, the assembly dispersed in various states of satisfaction, indignation, or disgust.

Half-an-hour later Mr. Laing was in Mrs. Tweedie's drawing-room. Mrs. Tweedie had refused to attend the meeting.

"I could not go," she had said. "I feel so horribly afraid of what may happen."

"Never was such a fiasco," he said. "If any congregation may be collectively written down an ass, it is the Free Church congregation in Mossiel. Here have we been worried for months about this business, and this is the end of it."

"I am so thankful," said Mrs. Tweedie, with a sigh of relief. "But I am still more surprised. I can't understand it."

"So much for results, when a noisy minority are brought to book. It is Hepburn has done it, though I doubt whether he knows that himself—he and Cruickshanks between them. Cruickshanks has always hated him; he hates him worse now, just because he has done, or tried to do, him an injury. He couldn't fight his own battle heartily, because he was not quite certain it was not Hepburn's battle; and Hepburn's own admission that he had rather the question had not come on at present just gave the quiet, peace-loving part of the congregation their cue. They were really ready to vote any way for the sake of peace, and felt sure they would be right in following Hepburn's lead."

"Poor Mr. Hepburn," sighed Mrs. Tweedie.

"Don't say poor," replied Mr. Laing, a sudden gravity replacing his usual half-bantering manner. "That man has raised the whole tone of the place already, merely by the in-

fluence of his personal character. All this turmoil is just the seething and working of the scum. He'll have a fight for it yet, but, mark my words, if Hepburn's life is spared, he'll hold a position in this town one of these days such as no minister ever held here before—such as few ministers hold anywhere—just because there are so few of his stamp.”

Mrs. Tweedie laid down her work, and looked thoughtfully into the fire. “Will not this scandal about Lady Ellinor do him mischief?”

“Not a bit. My dear lady, not a soul really believes it. They are only trying to persuade themselves and others they believe it, because they wish it was true. It will all die out, even if the poor girl does not go off with Sir Maurice Adair, which I sorely dread she will do some day, if that old fool, her husband, does not look out.”

“Oh, God forbid.”

“Amen. But I can only say it as a hearty wish, not with any strong confidence.”

He wished her good-night with the words. But often, in after days, did that brief conversation come back to Mrs. Tweedie's mind.

CHAPTER XV.

A NEW REVELATION.

ONE fine morning in the early spring, Mr. Hepburn was standing before his study fire, with an open letter in his hand and an expression of extremely puzzled surprise on his face. The purport of the letter was to inform him that Mrs. Munro, of Glenavon, wished to see him upon a matter of very grave importance, and to beg that he would name any day when it would be convenient to him to lunch at Glenavon, and say at what hour he would wish a carriage to meet him at Avonside Station.

Munro, of Glenavon! The name seemed familiar to him, and yet he could not recall when or where he had heard it. Then a cell of his memory opened and let forth the sentence—"Mrs. Munro struck in just in time;" and putting on his hat, he went in search of Mr. Laing, whom he found at breakfast.

"Who is Mrs. Munro?" he asked, as soon as he was seated.

"Mrs. Munro, of Glenavon?"

"I suppose so. She writes from Glenavon."

"To you?"

"Yes."

"What on earth is up now, Hepburn? She is a staunch Roman Catholic."

For all his answer, James Hepburn handed him the letter he had received. Mr. Laing read it through deliberately

"My dear fellow, your fortune is made! She has clearly seen the error of her ways, and wishes to be received into

the Free Church. It's a pity we haven't a deanery or bishopric to give you. You'll be Moderator of the General Assembly directly."

"Is she the Mrs. Munro you spoke of that night after the ball?"

"The same, and a most charming old lady. Do have something to eat, Hepburn. I should not feel as if it was half so near eleven, if you would have some breakfast."

"Thank you. I never lunch so early, and I am going away, so you can continue your breakfast in peace."

What possible matter of grave importance could there be in which there could be any point of contact for a member of one of the old Roman Catholic families of the country, and a Free Church minister? James Hepburn pondered over that problem almost unceasingly, but in vain. He started on his expedition without any possible solution thereof having presented itself.

A staid and dignified old butler came forward as the carriage drove up and the footman opened the door; and with a not unnecessary request that Mr. Hepburn would look well to his footing across the polished oak floor of the hall, led the way to the drawing-room.

Mrs. Munro came forward to receive him, and he all but stopped dead to gaze in bewildered admiration. Even Lady Ellinor Farquharson, he thought, must yield the palm to this vision of beautiful old age. Her dress was very simple, but of rich material, with costly white lace at the throat and wrists. A cap of the same almost seemed to blend with her snow-white hair, above delicately chiselled features, and soft dark eyes, which were clear and bright as a child's might be. She welcomed her visitor with a perfect mingling of graceful cordiality and stately dignity.

"It is very kind of you Mr. Hepburn," she said, "to

comply so readily with my request. I only hope I have not made too great a demand on time which must be very valuable."

James Hepburn had all the qualifications for a courtier. The presence of such a woman as Mrs. Munro made him one on the spot. "I am only too happy to obey your summons," he said, "though I confess I am puzzled to imagine what commands you can have to lay upon me."

"Ah, we will speak of that after luncheon, which will soon be ready. Have you ever been at Glenavon before?"

"Never nearer than the railway station. It is very beautiful."

"Not so beautiful, I am told, as the country in your neighbourhood. I have never been in that direction. We go out very little. People think it is from pride and exclusiveness, but it is not so. Since my great sorrow, I mean the death of my only daughter at eighteen years of age, I have felt little inclined for society. When a great sorrow comes we feel how hollow and artificial it all is. I went to the election ball."

"That would hardly be enjoyable to you, I should think," he said, trying mentally to picture her in such a scene as the ball-room of a country town, filled with a somewhat promiscuous assembly.

"Well, no." Then after a pause, she added, "I do not think Scottish women have good taste in dress."

"So I am told. I am no judge. I have seen too little of any other style of dress to be able to form a comparison."

"You have never travelled?"

"I was once in London. Otherwise I have never crossed the border."

"Really. Yet you do not look—you will understand what I mean—home bred. How is that? Ah, I remember.

You are an accomplished scholar and linguist. That always makes a man cosmopolitan." Then suddenly changing to French, she said—"They tell me you speak French very well. Is it so?"

"You must judge," he answered in French. "I was very fortunate in having an excellent teacher when I was a mere child."

"Yes," she replied, "it is good. A slight foreign accent. But that is no consequence where it is the accent of refined, well-educated people. Shall we go to luncheon? I think it is ready. I am all alone to-day," she added, as they crossed the hall. "Mr. Munro is away from home."

She kept up a light conversation during luncheon, easily and naturally bending it in such directions as should make the superiority of his attainments over her own apparent. He only felt that she was a most agreeable hostess; he was not in the least aware how thoroughly she was making him show himself to the best advantage.

"I am not at home this afternoon," she said to the butler as they left the dining-room. "Bring coffee when I ring."

"And now, Mr. Hepburn," she said, as she reseated herself in the drawing-room, "Have you really no suspicion why I asked you to call upon me?"

"Not the very slightest."

"Whom do you know about Mossgiel?"

"Beyond the town?"

"Yes."

"Besides some members of my own congregation, only General and Lady Ellinor Farquharson."

"No one else?"

"No."

"Not Sir Maurice Adair?"

He flushed suddenly. A half-suspicion of what was coming darted across his mind. "I have met him," he said, "at Strathellon. I can hardly say I know him."

She was watching him closely. "Ah, you have met him at Strathellon. Does not that help you to understand what is in my thoughts?"

"Coupled with what I heard of you at the ball, Mrs. Munro, I fear it does. Still I am quite at a loss to understand why that should have made you send for me to come to you."

"Well, I must tell you. You know we women talk a good deal to our maids, sometimes. People say we gossip. Perhaps so. But if the maids are of the right sort, it is useful occasionally. My maid and Lady Ellinor Farquharson's are great friends, notwithstanding that they are always trying to convert each other. Lady Ellinor's maid is always talking about you. She thinks you infallible. I am sure you have Popes in your church. No Catholic could revere the Holy Father more than she does you."

"I hope it is only my misfortune, I don't think it is my fault."

"It is a useful misfortune," she replied, smiling, "since it led her to speak so much of you, and, in confirmation of her opinion, to say how much Lady Ellinor herself admired and respected you."

"Mrs. Munro," he said, with some little agitation, "what is it you have in your mind?"

"To urge, to implore you, to make a great effort to save her ere it is too late. You have seen Sir Maurice Adair, you say?"

"Yes."

"Then you know how dangerous he is."

"Mr. Laing told me about the ball."

“ Ah, it was very sad.”

“ But surely there is no danger at present. They are not meeting now.”

“ They are simply staying in the same house in England.”

“ Is it really so ? ”

“ It is, indeed. General Farquharson must be mad.”

“ And yet he loves her dearly.”

“ He adores her. But he never lets her see it. Oh, it is a terrible thing when military discipline gets hold of a man's feelings. Perhaps, too, having married so late, he is a little afraid of appearing ridiculous. But whatever be the cause, the fact is certain. She is young, full of life and fire and feeling, and he treats her with a sort of calm parental affection. Sir Maurice Adair is madly in love with her. To do him justice, I believe he has struggled hard, as hard as she is still struggling. He has not the courage to keep away from her ; and what man could help loving her ? She is so true, so generous, so good. She is disappointed and unhappy ; Sir Maurice knows it. He is very lovable, he adores her ; and he believes, as she does, that General Farquharson is by nature too cold to have anything more than a mild affection for his wife. Oh, Mr. Hepburn, there can be but one ending, if something is not done—an ending of lasting wretchedness for my beautiful Lady Ellinor ! ”

Her cheek had flushed, and she had kindled almost into vehemence. James Hepburn had grown very pale, and his voice was a trifle hoarse, as he asked—

“ What can be done ? ”

“ What can be done, must be done by you. There is no one else. They are soon coming back. You must go to her. You have her confidence, and regard. As a messenger from heaven you must warn, implore, entreat her, while there is yet time to save her from the dreadful fate hanging over her.”

He started up, and began to pace hurriedly up and down the room. The drops were standing on his forehead in his agitation. She watched him in silence, with intense earnestness. At length he came and stood near her.

"You are putting too much upon me," he said. "How can I do this thing? I who know nothing of women."

"You are strong and true. Such men are always gentle to women."

"Yes, in intention. But I have no courtly manners and phrases. I am a rough son of the people. How can such a man put the warning you would have me give into such words as will not seem to her coarse and brutal? I shall only rouse her deep resentment, and make her feel—"

"Hush," and she rose from her seat, and laid her still beautiful hand upon his arm, looking at him with eyes that seemed to pierce his very soul, as she said, in a low, solemn voice—

"You must make her feel that John the Baptist is risen from the dead."

He sat down in the chair from which he had risen, and buried his face in his hands. After a brief silence, she spoke again in her low, musical voice—

"I bid you do this thing, because it is the only thing that can be done, and because you can do it with the best chance of success. Do you think I am asking you to do what I would not do myself, but for the conviction that your influence will be more powerful? I have heard of you, Mr. Hepburn. I know what you are, and I know what women are. Believe me, no one can influence a woman of Lady Ellinor Farquharson's temperament so powerfully as a man, at once strong and tender, whose own life is perfectly pure, and who will plead with all the passionate earnestness inspired by his own deep pain at the thought that any woman can sink to such a wretched fate."

He heard every word she said, and he heard, with the inner ear, something else. He heard his own voice saying—“Depend upon it, if the chance be given to warn her without doing more harm than good, I will not be found wanting.” And he knew that the hour was come. He raised his head at length, and said calmly and firmly—

“I will do your bidding, Mrs. Munro. I may not refuse. God grant that you may prove a messenger from heaven, and that it may be given to me to speak, not only earnestly, but wisely.”

“Have no fear,” she replied; “you will fail in neither wisdom nor earnestness. And if you fail of success you will feel only deep sorrow, unembittered by any remorse, that you did not attempt to interpose the shield of a pure and honourable devotion between a beautiful and cruelly-trying woman and a genuine, if unholy passion.”

He looked at her with a startled expression. “A pure and honourable devotion,” he repeated.

“Yes, Mr. Hepburn. You love Lady Ellinor Farquharson.”

“Surely that is hardly the right word.”

“You would lay down your life for her?”

“Assuredly,” he answered, with a curious vision of the time, place, and speaker, recalled by the question.

“And is not that love? You would not call it so before the world, because to the evil all things are evil; and you know that it is a love which would never call up in your mind a thought you would blush to own. It is just because of that love you can save her. Only love can save.”

He hastily rose. “Mrs. Munro,” he said, “I am a blunt, unpolished man. You have laid on me a charge I could not answer before God and my own conscience, if I declined. But you must let me go away now. I cannot

wear a mask and talk carelessly about other things, when my soul is filled with strange and perplexing thoughts. I must be alone now and think. You have greatly startled me."

"Please ring the bell," she quietly replied. "I will order the carriage."

"No, thank you. I shall greatly prefer to walk."

"Good-bye, then, and may God prosper your mission. If it is given to you to succeed, Mr. Hepburn, you will know a deep and lasting joy that will brighten all your future life."

In a few moments James Hepburn was on his way back to the station, going mechanically in the right direction with very little consciousness of any deliberate volition in the matter. And when he found himself in his study he had very little distinct remembrance of how he got there.

"Only love can save." In all the wide expanse of his powerful mind there seemed to be room but for a fragment of the thoughts that came crowding round that simple sentence. The quiet, gentle Frenchwoman, to whom the most of his brethren would have gone with an ardent desire to convert her from the error of her ways, had given him a lesson of life-long import; had thrown a ray of fresh light upon the great leading feature of the teaching of Christianity, and had suggested a startling solution of the problem on which he had often meditated since the night of his nearly fatal encounter with Robert Blackwood.

"Only love can save." Could he look around him and marvel that the churches seemed so rarely to have any message for those lost sheep which had been of yore the first to listen to the Master's voice? He thought of the oft-times well-merited taunt, that those mysterious directions received in response to private prayer, always pointed in the direction of better stipends; of ministers aiming only at popu-

larity through torrents of fluent declamation or highly-coloured rhetoric ; of others whom he had known, openly alleging as a reason for seeking a change of abode that the society around was not good enough for them or their wives—or giving their whole time to promotion of fierce theological wrangling. Where did they manifest the love that could save ? Were their hearts yearning over the sins and sorrow surrounding them on every side ? Were they not rather a very canker, eating out the life of the churches, devouring the churches' substance and leaving their work undone ? Were they not hirelings whose voices the sheep would never hear ? How could they hope to seek and save that which is lost, so long as self-interest, self-gratification or ambition were the guiding principles of their lives ?

From that simple sentence also a light seemed to stream upon his own relations to Robert Blackwood. He was too thoroughly honest to the very heart's core to seek in a spirit of morbid unreal humility to deny to himself any credit which was fairly his due. He had become aware that he had won a stronger hold upon the man than anyone else had ever done. Blackwood himself had explained the reason. "I heard ye ca' me 'brither,' and nae in the way ministers are aye sayin' 'dear brethren' frae the pulpit, wi' nae mair meanin' than a parrot's chatter. I'll ne'er forget it." That simple word had brought the love that can save home to the heart of one of the outcasts, and even if it had not availed to cast out the legion of devils that were reigning there, they at least had been powerless to cast out wholly its saving influence, and the end had not come yet. He sat far into the night thinking, thinking, until his head ached with the strain ; and he went to his bed at last, by no means a new man, but more fully conscious what manner of man he was than he had ever been before, and with an added sense of heavy responsibility resting upon him.

CHAPTER XVI.

DANGER INCREASING.

HE had pledged himself to undertake the charge laid upon him, and no thought of shrinking back ever crossed his mind. But how best to execute his task, was a question over which he pondered through many a wakeful hour. General and Lady Ellinor Farquharson had not yet returned to Strathellon, although they were expected shortly, so he had time for reflection ; in all such cases, probably, a doubtful advantage. Who has ever yet pondered deeply over some momentous interview, and in the end said anything in the least approaching the formula he had marked out for himself ?

The pregnant thoughts with which his mind was filled were not without their effect upon his outward bearing. That effect was described in several varied phrases, according to the colour of the mental spectacles through which he was regarded.

"He looks grave and anxious," Mrs. Tweedie remarked to Mr. Laing. "Do you think he is worrying himself about all these stupid stories, now that the Farquharsons are coming back ?"

"I don't think so," replied Mr. Laing, his thoughts flying off, as they frequently did, to that strange summons to Glenavon, of which, with quiet tact he had refrained from speaking, seeing that the minister was not disposed to introduce the subject. "I daresay his digestion is out of order. You must get Tweedie to take him in hand."

"The minister seems to me to look rather black and

sulky," remarked Miss Muir to her constant ally Mrs. Haigg. "I really do begin to think he wanted the hymn book introduced, and only would not say so because he knew every one would be against him; and that he is sulking over it."

"Mr. Hepburn looks far from lively," Mrs. Watson said to Mr. Cruickshanks. "You may depend your arrow found a joint in his armour."

"I could hardly term it a bow drawn at a venture," replied Mr. Cruickshanks. "Still, I feel what I should call his dour look, is an additional confirmation of the something more than mere suspicion, which caused my remark. It may yet bear fruit."

"He seems to me to be working more energetically than ever," Mrs. Watson continued, "and I am sure he preaches with more earnestness. No one could certainly ever have accused him of not being a very hard worker, but I think he is doing twice as much. Trying to make up for the false steps he feels he has taken, I suppose."

The minister himself heard nothing of these various theories. But one evening Mrs. Findlay herself appeared in his study, and announced with an intonation of indignant protest, that Robert Blackwood wished to speak to him.

Blackwood had too much of the quiet self-possession common among Scotchmen of his class, to sit on the extreme edge of his chair, fidget with anything, or otherwise manifest clumsily awkward indications of embarrassment; but Mr. Hepburn detected instantly that he was slightly embarrassed, and took the initiative.

"You have something you wish to say to me, Blackwood, I see. Draw up your chair to the fire, and make yourself quite at home. You have not been getting into trouble, my lad, have you?"

"Nae, sir, I'm in nae trouble, save for the fear ye may think I'm ower fond o' interferin' in yer affairs."

"You did me far too great a service, Blackwood," the minister answered frankly, "the last time you did that, to let me feel any touchiness about that matter. In truth you did a service to both Lady Ellinor and me. Of course you have heard of Mr. Cruickshanks' attack upon me. But for your warning, I should not have had the slightest suspicion what he meant, and might very possibly have answered in a way which would have drawn forth some more direct reference to Lady Ellinor. That would have been a most unfortunate thing."

"I'm proud to hear ye say it, sir. An' its just about that business I wad mak' bold to speak to ye the noo. Folk is a' sayin', an' I canna but see it's the truth, that ye are lookin' gey serious, whiles, the noo, an' sometimes a bit troubled an' anxious. We dinna ken, doun in our pairts o' the toun, a' that gangs on, but the thocht cam' to me that maybe that slithery auld deevil Cruickshanks was makin' trouble for ye. Syne I got that in my heid I felt I couldna rest until I'd tauld ye that if that's the way of it, I can pit a stapper on his tongue ony day; an' ye've but to say the word if ye wish it dune."

"Then it is true." But feeling he was thinking aloud Mr. Hepburn stopped abruptly.

"What will be true, sir?"

"I mean that your declaration seems to imply the truth of a good deal I have heard rumoured?"

"I dinna ken what ye may have heard, sir, an' I've nae wish to say mair. I think it wad be just as weel for yersel' that ye dinna ask me to explain. I wadna say but ye might feel in an awkward position. I've nae wish either to harm Cruickshanks, auld hypocrite though he is. I've had his

money, an' he's been fair though hard wi' me. It wad be ill for me to do him a bad turn just through spite. But eh, minister, ye'll nae do muckle amang sinners like me, sae lang as ye hae men like yon in the eldership. We ken the hypocrites, if ye dinna ken them. Can ye think what it's like to us to see men like yon gangin' on Communion Sabbath sae sleek and sanctimonious to the kirk, in the black and white, and dispensin' the elements, whiles maybe to ane they've sworn at soundly through the week?"

Mr. Hepburn turned upon him sharply. "None of that, Blackwood. We ministers are powerless there. If you sinners would come and stand boldly by us, we would very soon rid the church of that scandal. You hold back, and you know it, because you are not ready to give up evil habits, which the church requires you to give up. You, personally, have not the will; others of your class have not the chance to play the hypocrite. Thus you stand clear and leave those who have both will and chance to press in. Then because your consciences tell you you are wrong, you point to the very evil you are causing as a reason for holding aloof."

"Eh, minister," replied the man, "but I like to hear ye hit oot wi' yer tongue, though I'm no sayin' ye're a'thegither richt; but that's neither here nor there. But, as I was sayin', I've nae mind to do the man ony mischief through spite; but I ken weel eneuch he has nae love for ye. He doubts ye ken or suspect too muckle. I misdoubt he'd be glad eneuch to do you an ill turn; an' if that's what he's at the noo, an' it's causin' ye trouble, ye've but to say the word, an' I'll stop his tongue. An' ye'll ken weel eneuch, sir, ye've nae cause to fear a soul shall ever ken a word has passed between us."

"I believe that, Blackwood, most unhesitatingly. I

would trust my interests in your keeping right gladly at any time ; and I thank you most heartily for the kind feeling towards me which prompts your action. But you are entirely mistaken. Cruickshanks may be trying to make mischief for me ; indeed, judging from what I know of the man, I should say the chances are that he is. But I have no knowledge of the fact, if it is so. The causes of my present anxiety, which I do not deny, lie in circumstances with which I have no actual personal interest, and which are far beyond Cruickshanks' power to influence. All the same, Blackwood, had it been as you suppose, I could not have taken your offer. I can hit out openly in self-defence, either actually, as you know, or with my tongue. But however much a man might be trying to injure me behind backs, I could take no part in such a proceeding. It would be as repugnant to me as a man, as I feel it would be unworthy of the profession of a minister, to make any use of knowledge I might chance to possess that would be detrimental to a man's general character, but which had no special bearing on the point at issue, in order to cripple his power to injure me."

Blackwood looked at him half defiantly. " Minister, did I no ken ye're sic a splendid hitter, I wad say ye were just a gomeril, giein' rogues a chance that gait. Ye maun e'en fight the deil wi' his ain weapons whiles. An' I teill ye oot fairly, I'll nae pit the question to ye again. I'll keep watch for mysel' and if Cruickshanks tries to do ye an ill turn, I'll mak' it the worst days' wark for him ever he set his han' to, an' without giein' ye a chance to help or to hinder."

The minister smiled sadly. " Whatever you make up your mind to do, Blackwood, I have no doubt you will do, without consulting my wishes. But, remember, that come what may, I shall always gratefully recall the feeling you

have shown towards me. The thought of your honest affection for me, my lad, has been often a cheering thought to me in the midst of much discouragement."

For a moment the habitual sullenness of the young man's face passed away completely, and the minister then recognized fully for the first time how very handsome he was. He looked at Mr. Hepburn with a wistful half-yearning look. Then he started up, seized the minister's hand, wrung it almost vehemently, and was gone before there was time for another word.

Mr. Hepburn turned once more to his interrupted reading, but he soon laid his book aside, and the anxious look which had roused so many comments, gathered afresh upon his face. He had seen the Strathellon omnibus pass that afternoon full of servants and piled with luggage, and he knew the fulfilment of his pledge could not be far distant. Only, having heard that Sir Maurice Adair was not expected immediately, he was resolved not to force an opportunity, but to wait till one occurred of which he could take advantage easily and naturally. He scanned his own motives sharply, and pronounced himself clear of allowing inclination to influence judgment, although he was conscious of a certain thankfulness for a reprieve.

A week and more had passed and then it seemed but natural he should walk over and call at Strathellon, so he started one fine afternoon. A young footman, a stranger to him, appeared at the door and answered his question with some apparent embarrassment and hesitation.

"I really, sir—I can't positively say if her ladyship is at home. I—— If you'll be kind enough to step in, sir, I'll inquire."

Rather wondering what this hesitation portended, Mr. Hepburn followed the man to the drawing room which was

empty. He had not been long alone when he heard a light step, certainly not the footman's, crossing the ante-room, and turning with the expectation of greeting Lady Ellinor herself, saw enter the room her maid, Alison, very pale, but with a set, resolute expression on her face.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Alison," he said. "Is Lady Ellinor Farquharson not at home?"

"My lady and the General are out riding, sir, and I hope you'll excuse me. When I saw you coming up the drive I told Edward not to say my lady was out, but to bring you here that I might speak to you."

"Is anything wrong?" asked the minister anxiously. "You look much disturbed."

Alison struggled for a moment to answer quietly. But it was in vain. She burst into tears.

"Mrs. Alison, what is the matter?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," she sobbed, making desperate efforts to recover her composure, "but my heart is like to break. Would you please come a little this way, sir, so that I can talk quietly to you, and keep my eye on the door of the ante-room, that I may be sure no one comes in."

Mr. Hepburn obeyed, saying gently but firmly as he did so, "Now, sit down here and try and control yourself. I see you are much agitated. You must try and tell me quietly what is wrong and what I can do to help you."

She took the seat he indicated, and after a few moments' silent struggle, said--

"It's about my lady, sir."

"Lady Ellinor?" and his heart gave a sudden, quick throb.

"Yes, sir. Oh, Mr. Hepburn, I've known her since she was five years old, for I was in the nursery before I was

ladies' maid to the young ladies, and I love her dearly. I would die for her to-morrow, and what can I do? And I scarce know how to tell you."

"Perhaps it's hardly necessary for you to try. You are anxious about Sir Maurice Adair."

Alison gave a violent start. "Oh, who told you? Do people suspect?"

"Nothing of consequence, I believe, though there has been gossip about them ever since I have been in Mossgiel. But some one who loves Lady Ellinor as much as you do spoke to me about her, and made me promise to try and save her."

"Ah, it was Mrs Munro. I know it was. The dear, good lady. If ever there was a saint on earth she is one, Roman Catholic or not."

"I will not say you are wrong, Mrs. Alison. I know we may trust to you."

"And you will try to save her? You don't know, Mr. Hepburn, what a veneration my dear lady has for you. I've heard her say as much again and again. And it's not lightness, sir, nor vanity. She hasn't a bit of that about her; and I know she has struggled hard, but she's giving way fast. I couldn't bear it any longer after what I saw in England, and I made up my mind if I came to the manse I'd see and speak to you as soon as I could."

"And I think," he said, "you may do your lady good service if you would answer a few questions for me."

"That I will, sir. You wouldn't ask a question without a good motive."

"With what feeling did she marry General Farquharson?"

"With just the sort of feeling he might have turned into a deep love if he'd known how. She'd no very strong

feeling about it, but she knew my lord and lady wished it. Of course it was a very good marriage, and my lord knew that the General's character was of the highest. He would never have sacrificed a daughter. And Lady Ellinor liked him very much, and was glad to please her parents. She had never cared for anyone, so she did not know what love meant."

"And has she always been unhappy?"

"I can hardly tell, sir. I am quite sure she soon began to feel chilled and disappointed. The General is always so stately and formal. I've no patience with him. I know he loves her dearly, and if he would only show it she'd be safe enough. But how is she to find it out when he's always got his full dress parade manners on? It's just chilled back all her love for him. I never liked Sir Maurice coming so much about the house. He's a man any woman might love, I must say that for him. He's not a dissipated profligate, and to do him justice I believe he has struggled against the temptation as hard as my dear lady has. But he believes, too, the General cares very little about her, and would just get a divorce if my lady went away and be quite happy with some one else."

"Good God! has it come to that?"

"O no, sir, not in words. But that is what is in his mind, I'm sure. Why, sir, I've heard them in the servants' hall going on about the General's coldness. They all worship Lady Ellinor, and say he's no right to such a wife if he can't be different to her. As I was saying, I always feared Sir Maurice; but when we were in England he came to the place where we were staying, and then I could see he was losing all control over himself. He's just madly in love with her, and it just makes the contrast to the General all the greater, and I know she's giving way. She's going to do

what she's never done yet. She's going"—a sob choked the words.

"Going to do what?"

"Going to meet him in the woods to-morrow."

"Meet him! You do not mean he is back?" exclaimed the minister, in a startled tone.

"Back? Yes, sir. He wasn't to have been back for two months. But back he was before we'd been eight-and-forty hours at Strathellon."

"And how do you know she's going to meet him?"

Alison hesitated a moment, and her colour deepened.

"Perhaps you'll blame me, sir," she said at length, "but I can't help it. I just listened in this very ante-room, and heard it. I don't care if it was wrong, if it helps me to save my dear lady. It was just this way. I hadn't a notion my lady wasn't alone, and I was coming to speak to her, and as I came across the ante-room I heard his voice. I believed he was hundreds of miles away, and the start made me stop dead. Then I heard him say, 'You will come just this once, will you not? I will not ask it again.' Then I determined I would listen, right or wrong. It came into my mind, in a moment, that if she gave in I would come to you at once. She wouldn't promise for a time, but he pleaded hard, and at last she did, and she's going to meet him at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon, at what's always been called 'The Trysting Place.' You know it, sir?"

"Quite well."

"Well, I heard it all settled, and then I slipped away and very soon I saw him riding down the approach. And I made up my mind then I would see you. I was coming to the manse this evening, sir. And, oh, you will try and stop her!" and the woman clasped her hands in an agony of entreaty.

"I will not try; I will do it," he said through his clenched teeth.

"Oh, God bless you, sir. If anyone can save my dear darling lady, it is you. But now you'll please to tell me not a word more, sir. I've done my duty by my lady, but I'm only her servant. I've no business to pry into these things. I know you'll do the best man can do; and if you want any information I can give you, you'll ask me, or tell me anything you think I ought to do. But I won't discuss my lady, even with you, sir, one bit beyond what is necessary for her own sake. And now will you please not be offended if I ask you to go away. It's drawing near the time my lady and the General will likely be coming in; and I wouldn't like them to find you. If you'll let me show you out through the conservatory, you can go by the footpath through the shrubberies, and then they'll be safe not to meet you."

"But the footman? Will he not tell Lady Ellinor?"

"Oh, no, sir; I can keep that right."

"Good-bye, then, Mrs. Alison. All that I can say about your listening is—thank God you did; and thank God Lady Ellinor has such a true and faithful friend always about her."

"Thank you, sir," replied the woman quietly, as she closed the conservatory door behind him.

"Only love can save." The words kept sounding in his ears as he walked home. But did that imply that love could always save? Surely no mortal woman was ever environed by love so true and steadfast as Lady Ellinor Farquharson. But would it avail to save her from a love which was as real of its kind as that which sought to interpose between it and her? That was in the future. For the moment he was concerned only with the fact that he was

pledged, within twenty-four hours, to confront her, and for the moment turn her from her perilous purpose. As to his success there was no question. He was at least her superior in physical strength, and that strength should be used if by no other means he could induce her to forego her intended interview. What weighed with him most heavily was the consciousness that the future results to her might in great measure depend upon the manner in which he discharged the commission laid upon him by every consideration of love and duty. One only advantage he had gained from this turn of circumstances: all hesitation about fitting time and method was past. He was forced into action, with nothing left for his own judgment to decide save the fitness of the weapons he might employ.

CHAPTER XVII.

A LION IN THE PATH.

THE Trysting Place was a well-known spot in the Strathellon woods. Down a romantic glen, winding away among the hills, and not very far distant from the house, there ran a burn of a size to almost justify its assuming the title of a small river. In fact, where the glen widened out and lost itself in the broader valley through which the river flowed, at which spot the two streams of water united, the one was very little larger than the other. The lower part of the glen had always been open to the public, the upper part alone being held as belonging to the private grounds of Strathellon. A wire fence constituted the line of demarcation, with a gate closing the path which led up to the glen. Not far above this gate the path ascended, in zig-zag, an extremely steep brae, through a thick copse of oak, birch and hazel, and then skirted the brow of the declivity, as far as a clearing, where grew a very fine oak of enormous girth, and fabulous age, with a seat fitted round the trunk, which had always been known as "The Trysting Place." The wood all around was dense, as dense as is generally the case where the ill-chosen sites of stealthy meetings are in question.

This was the spot where, for the first time, Lady Ellinor Farquharson had promised to meet Sir Maurice Adair clandestinely, allowing herself to be over-persuaded by some specious excuse concerning his anxiety to discuss with her some scandal connecting his name with that of a woman of somewhat questionable reputation in England. She did not,

perhaps would not, ask herself what right he had to be so anxious to clear himself in her eyes? Nor probably had he deliberately formed the intention of explaining how impossible it was for him to have given even a passing thought to any other woman. He had simply made the excuse to secure a meeting where they might be sure of no interruption; and she had yielded, merely because she was becoming constantly less able to resist Sir Maurice's pleading.

The gate in the fence, which separated the two divisions of the glen, was reached by a private path from the house at Strathellon, and just within that gate, therefore, was the spot where James Hepburn felt most certain of intercepting Lady Ellinor. In the strange, deep calm of intense excitement, he took up his position, just sufficiently beyond the gate to be invisible, in case of any afternoon strollers from the town extending their walk so far. It was a lovely afternoon, the woods in all their fresh spring beauty, the air laden with the scent of wild flowers, and the songs of myriads of birds resounding on every side. But he had neither eyes nor ears for such sights and sounds, as he stood leaning against the trunk of a tree. Sight and hearing were strained to catch one sight—one sound—the flutter of a dress—the click of the gate latch.

She came at last, and she was very close to him before she saw him. He marked the sudden start and the quick flush, as her eye fell upon him; but then, with a cordial smile, though with, he fancied, a slight shade of embarrassment in her manner, she advanced to meet him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hepburn," she said. "I had begun to think you were going to drop our acquaintance altogether. How is it we have not seen you?"

"I have not been able to make out a visit when you were at home."

"And are you out for a stroll this afternoon?" she asked, looking at him, he thought, rather keenly. "It is not often you indulge yourself in an idle ramble, I fancy. I think you are looking as if you stood in need of a little idleness. You look worn."

"No idleness brought me here this afternoon, Lady Ellinor," he said, in a low, sad voice; "and if I look worn, it is with grief, not with work."

"Oh, what is it? Are you in trouble? Has something happened? Mr. Hepburn, why do you look at me so strangely?"

"Should I not look strange, worn, anything save peaceful and content, when deadly peril is hanging over your head?"

"Over my head? What do you mean? What extraordinary delusion is this?"

"It is no delusion. Would to God it were. You say that because you believe I do not know. Lady Ellinor, dear Lady Ellinor, by all you hold sacred, by all your hopes of happiness, here and hereafter, I implore you turn back at once, and shun the fearful peril that awaits you in this wood."

She turned very white, and was silent for a moment; then she said quietly, but with a sort of catching of her breath,

"Mr. Hepburn, you must be ill, or the victim of some extravagant hoax. What possible peril can threaten me here, within our own private grounds?"

"The most deadly peril that can befall a woman," he said. "The peril of being led on to sacrifice her faith and truth to a solemnly sworn vow, her peace of mind, and all her hopes of true happiness, for the fevered dream of an unsanctified love."

She saw then that fencing was useless, and, gathering all her force, she drew herself up proudly; but he saw that, none the less, she was trembling violently.

"Mr. Hepburn," she said, "I know you too well to attribute such words to anything save some hallucination, resulting from disordered health. Let me entreat you to return home at once."

"Would it were hallucination. Prove to me that Sir Maurice Adair is not waiting for you at the 'Trysting Place,' and I will implore your pardon on my knees."

"Mr. Hepburn! this is too much! You forget yourself very strangely. Allow me to pass. Do not force me to remind you that you are within the private grounds of Strathellon."

The path, at the point he had purposely chosen, was very narrow, hemmed in on one side by a projecting rock, on the other by tangled brushwood. His stalwart form completely blocked it. He folded his arms, and looked at her with sad, beseeching eyes, but with a firmly set face.

"Lady Ellinor," he said, "if some great peril to life or limb threatened you in that wood, how could I answer to God or man if, because you are incredulous, I allowed you to pass? How shall I answer if, because you are lulling yourself with groundless assurances of safety, I let you pass to face peril before which any physical danger is as child's play? What is man's strength given to him for, save to be the shield and protection of every woman whom he sees in danger? Listen to me for a moment, I beseech you. Do not dream that I credit you with any evil intent; but you are not happy, and a man who loves you madly is offering you the deadly balsam of an ardent and unfeigned, though unlawful devotion. He is no selfish profligate, it may be even yet he believes, as you do, that each can say, Thus far

shall it go and no further. But it is not so. I beseech, I implore you, draw back while there is time ; while you can still meet your husband's eyes without shame and remorse. I love you, Lady Ellinor, with a love I dare lay bare, if that were possible, for your husband's closest inspection, and just because of that love no entreaty shall induce me to let you pass. You shall not cast the faintest slur on your fair fame while I can prevent it. You may spurn me, close your doors upon me, but so long as it is possible to save you, so long will I labour to save you."

He had spoken with a pleading accent, which had grown almost impassioned as he went on. Lady Ellinor Farquharson stood before him pale, trembling in every limb. Far beyond the force of his words was the influence of the depth of passionate yearning, which was the sum of all his consciousness at the moment. She raised her eyes to his face, as he paused, with a piteous expression, and her lips parted, but no sound came, and then he saw that she was tottering. Without speaking, he drew her gently to a seat hard by, and placed her on it. She struggled for composure for a moment longer, and then burst into passionate sobbing. He drew a long, deep breath of intense relief. He knew he had conquered for the time, and, sitting down beside her, he waited quietly until the first violence of the outburst was over.

"Oh, if you only knew how miserable I am," she sobbed at last.

"I know you are not happy ; but what is the unhappiness of your present lot to that which you will draw upon yourself by encouraging Sir Maurice's unlawful devotion ? You believe your husband is as cold as his manner seems to imply. It is not so. If you allow yourself to be induced to trifle with his good name, the bitterest drop in your cup

of retribution will be the discovery that you have cruelly wounded a love far deeper than you believe. Will you run the risk of bringing dishonour on an old and honourable name, of sacrificing your own fair fame, of casting a shadow over the lives of your young sisters, merely because a kind, generous, and most confiding husband is by nature and habit cold and formal in his manner? Put it how you may, that is the real truth, Lady Ellinor."

"But I am not going to do any of these things," she faltered.

"You do not mean to do them, but that is whither you are tending. You have already set your feet upon an incline, which grows steeper and more slippery with every step you take. Draw back in time before every kind word or action on your husband's part shall be a sharp stab for you, and find peace at least in self-renunciation, in living for the benefit and happiness of all around you."

Lady Ellinor still made no reply. Her sobs had died away; but as he paused he saw her give a hasty, almost terrified, glance along the path.

"Dear Lady Ellinor," he said gently, "you will return to the house now, and let me be your messenger to Sir Maurice."

"Oh, no, that would never do," she exclaimed, with a gasp. "I must see him, and tell him."

"Not to-day. I cannot let you go. Your blood, if you perished, would rest on my head. Do you fear our meeting? Let any such dread be at rest. Do you suppose I cannot feel for him — cannot understand better than you can what his temptation has been? Do you think my heart does not bleed for you both in the cruel struggle which every law, human or divine, demands of you?"

He paused, but still she appeared to hesitate.

"Do not linger," he said. "I cannot—I dare not let you pass. It would be a sin for which I could hardly hope to be forgiven. You cannot feel all the force of my words now; but just because no evil intention is in your thoughts, you will, when you have time to think over them, in your inmost heart approve my action. Return home at once, I implore you. Remember, we are too near the public part of the glen to be quite safe against being seen, and your appearance betrays that you have been agitated.

She suddenly rose, a resolute expression gathering upon her pale face. "May God bless you," she said, in a low, husky tone, as she took and momentarily pressed his hand. Then hurriedly retracing her steps, she passed through the gate, and was out of sight in a few seconds.

Without a moment's loss of time, James Hepburn climbed the path up the brae, and made his way to the trysting place. Sir Maurice Adair was impatiently pacing the turf of the clearing in which the old tree stood. His expression, as his glance fell upon the minister, was a curiously mingled one of surprise, annoyance, and alarm.

"I am not the person you expected to see, Sir Maurice Adair," Mr. Hepburn said; "but I am her messenger to you."

"Mr. Hepburn, what in the name——"

"Nay, do not be uneasy, or think I am craftily trying to draw admissions from you. I parted from Lady Ellinor Farquharson not ten minutes since. Will you come and sit down for a few moments?"

In silent bewilderment the young man followed him to the seat.

"I will tell you, Sir Maurice, what I have not told Lady Ellinor—what will make you heartily rejoice that I intercepted her? Your purpose of meeting here was known."

“Known! How? By whom?”

“That I may not reveal. The knowledge fell accidentally into the hands of one who would die for Lady Ellinor. No possible harm will follow to her. It was perfectly understood there was no evil intent on either side, but I intercepted Lady Ellinor, persuaded her to return to the house, and promised to see you myself, and explain her absence. Sir Maurice Adair, from my very soul I feel for you. If I, far removed from Lady Ellinor as I am, by profession and social position, feel, as I do, the spell of her beauty and charm, what safety could there be for you but in total absence? But have you ever pictured to yourself the fate to which you are luring her?”

“You are wronging Lady Ellinor,” exclaimed the young man, vehemently. “She knows my devotion is perfectly respectful, and that I know she would never stoop to anything that could injure her self-respect. She simply trusts me because she has confidence in both herself and me.”

The minister turned his searching eyes with a keen but kindly glance on the speaker.

“Suppose Lady Ellinor had met you here, and General Farquharson had unexpectedly appeared, would you have explained that to him?”

Sir Maurice bit his lip, and colored angrily.

“I do not for one moment doubt, Sir Maurice, that you honestly believe that you are speaking the truth. You have persuaded yourself that it is so, in order that, without self-reproach, you may follow the course which your feelings dictate. I know you are no selfish profligate, ready to sacrifice any woman to a mere passing passion. You have to hide from yourself the path you are treading, to avoid the stings of keen self-reproach. But we are both men, Sir

Maurice. You will not say to me that any woman is safe who accepts, in secret, the devotion which is to console her for her husband's coldness."

"Don't speak of him," exclaimed the young man angrily. "It maddens me to think of him. What right had he to tie that lovely creature to him, and then slowly break her heart?"

"The knot is tied, Sir Maurice, and can only be untied by death or sin. But the case is not so bad as that. I hold General Farquharson myself, greatly to blame, but there is no heart-breaking in question. A woman may suffer cruel disappointment, but her heart does not break because her husband, though invariably kind and affectionate, is somewhat cold and formal. You are, unconsciously I doubt not, trying to make the case out worse than it is, in order to justify yourself to yourself. But it is to save Lady Ellinor from a worse fate than the worst picture you can draw of her present fate, that I appeal to you now. I know, and you know, that the course you are following can have but one ending—that, sooner or later, the hour will come when she will be forced to place herself openly under your protection. I am a son of the people, ill-versed in the ways of your social sphere; you probably know, even better than I can know, all that that means for her. Is that the consolation you would offer her for her high place, untarnished name, and the love and admiration which surround her wherever she is known?"

"It would not come to that," he said, in extreme agitation.

"Do not try to deceive yourself, Sir Maurice, for your own sake, even more for Lady Ellinor's sake. To what lengths will your infatuation lead you, when already, while you hold yourself firmly your own master, it has caused you to risk her name being lightly spoken of?"

"Good God, Mr. Hepburn, what do you mean?"

"Already scandal has linked your names together, though, I allow, to no extent but what is inevitable where a woman like Lady Ellinor is the mark for jealousy and envy, to a host of gossip-loving idlers. But what have you done to-day? A gamekeeper, a woodman, a chance idler straying about these woods, and her name would have been on every scandalous tongue in Mossiel ere twenty-four hours were over."

Sir Maurice started up, and began to pace up and down in great agitation. Then he paused in front of the minister.

"You are right, Mr. Hepburn, in that, quite right. It was an act of madness. I thank you most heartily for having intercepted Lady Ellinor."

"And for having urged on her a sense of danger."

"No, I cannot honestly say that. I frankly admit I have gone too far, and I thank you for a warning which has pulled me up. But there can be no danger to Lady Ellinor. It seems to me almost an insult to her to suggest such a thing. She is above all temptation."

"No human being is that, Sir Maurice—least of all a woman who can consent, under any terms, to a clandestine interview with a man who holds towards her sentiments which he dare not avow in her husband's presence. She may be ignorant of her danger; but that makes the danger all the greater. Your love for her is genuine, but there is selfishness mixed with it, and the selfishness, not the love, is what will guide the course of your actions, if you do not at once sacrifice yourself for the sake of her peace, her happiness, her fair fame, and sternly resolve never to see her again until you have fought down this feeling."

"I can never do that."

"Then depart for ever," said the minister, sternly. "You are showing the immensity of the danger with every admission you make. If you have one grain of true manliness in you, take the pain of action on yourself, and by that action stand between the woman you love, and the weakness of her woman's nature; so that in days to come, when she shall more clearly see the depth of the abyss on the brink of which she is trembling, she may bless the name of the man who tore his very heart out, unflinchingly, to save her. Show, by perfect self-sacrifice, that your love is perfect, and the memory of it will be her safe-guard in the future. Will you do this?"

"You are too hard for me," he murmured; "but I will think of it; I will try. I am not made of the stuff heroes and martyrs are made of."

"Then quietly leave this place at once. It is well that you should not be seen here, even alone. Think well of what I have said, Sir Maurice, and God grant you may never have on your soul the curse of a cruelly-wronged husband, and the hopeless ruin of a noble-hearted and beautiful woman."

He turned and walked away as he spoke, without further greeting. His mood towards Sir Maurice was stern and bitter. He had little faith in his heroism, however good his resolutions for the moment might be. Self-sacrifice was not a plant to thrive and flourish in the moral atmosphere in which he had been born and brought up.

Looking back, just as he entered the wood, he saw Sir Maurice slowly retiring in the opposite direction, and lost in deep and anxious thought, he began to descend the brae. He was nearly halfway down, and was just turning one of the sharp angles of the path, when the sound of rapidly-approaching footsteps caught his ear. He paused, but ere

he had time to be even certain from which direction the sound came, a man, descending the path at headlong speed, and cutting across the angles by a dash through the copse-wood, came violently in contact with him from behind. In a moment he was driven over the edge of the brae, and only saved a further headlong descent by catching a firm grip of a sapling. Before he could recover himself, and gain the path, his unwitting assailant was out of sight; but he could hear his flying footsteps below, and the crashing of boughs as he thus unceremoniously cut off the corners. The minister, having recovered his hat, stood doubtfully on the path for a moment. The assault was clearly a pure accident, but it seemed for that very reason, all the more strange the assailant had never paused in his headlong career. After a brief hesitation, Mr. Hepburn hastily retraced his steps. As he emerged on to the clearing, he saw Sir Maurice Adair, in evident excitement, approaching from the other side.

“Have you seen anyone, Mr. Hepburn?” he asked.

“Hardly seen, but heavily felt.” And he explained what had happened.

“Thank God you stopped Lady Ellinor,” continued Sir Maurice, in much agitation. “The fellow must have been lurking about. A poacher, I expect, who among the copse-wood took me for a keeper. I am certain he tried to shoot me. I heard the click of a lock—a pistol, I am sure. I gave a shout, and made a dash in the direction and just caught a momentary glimpse of a figure, that was all. I thought he went in the direction you had taken.”

“Are you certain it was a pistol you heard?”

“Quite sure. It was just the sound of a lock when it misses fire.”

“You are probably right, that you were mistaken for a

keeper. Thank God it is no worse. You had better get clear of the wood at once, Sir Maurice."

With that they parted; and the minister's anxiety was greatly increased as he again descended the steep path. He could not but divine pretty readily what this startling incident meant. Where the undergrowth was thick, it was likely enough that Sir Maurice Adair, in his rough shooting suit, might have been mistaken for a keeper.

He slowly pursued his way downwards to the place of junction between the burn and the river. From thence the path skirted along the river bank close to the edge of steep, overhanging rocks, beneath which the water ran deep and strong to where, a few hundred yards further down, a wicket gate opened upon the public road, just at the point where a bridge spanned the river. On the bridge he paused, and, leaning over the parapet, gazed long and silently down into the heavily rolling stream, much swollen by recent rain. His heart was heavy with present sadness—
—heavier still with dread forebodings.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CRIME OR ACCIDENT?

FULLY conscious of that listless langour which generally succeeds to extreme excitement, Mr. Hepburn selected a book of comparatively light reading, and settled himself after dinner, in his study, for what he called an idle evening. He did not, however, even then find it very easy to keep his attention fixed upon the pages he mechanically read. Again and again he found his thoughts had drifted away, and the words he was reading left no impression on his mind.

It was drawing on towards nine o'clock, when a tap at the door was followed by the entrance of Mrs. Findlay.

"I beg yer pardon, Mr. Hepburn," she said, "but did ye chance to be near Castle Hill Farm the day?"

The house on Castle Hill Farm stood close by the road, about a quarter of a mile from the bridge which James Hepburn had crossed.

"I passed the house this afternoon," he said, "on my way home. I had just come straight from the bridge when I came in."

"And did ye chance to see aught of Mary, sir?"

"No. I did not see her. Is anything wrong?"

"Well, I hope not, sir. But I canna quite understand her not bein' hame. She has a cousin in service at Castle Hill, an' she went this afternoon to see her. She said when she went, she wad be sure to be hame by seven o'clock, an' she's no come yet."

"You can't expect, when two girls get together they

should take much heed of how time is passing," said the minister.

"Weel, sir, Mary's no apt to be late when she's fixed a time. I'm just feared she may hae foregathered wi' Rob Blackwood by the way, an' be stoppin' to chatter wi' him. If ye'll no mind bein' left alane in the house a wee while, Mr. Hepburn, I'll just gang a wee bit doun the road, an' see if I can see her."

"Yes. By all means go," said the minister, with a slight frown gathering on his brow. I will be on the watch to let you in."

"Thank you, sir ;" and Mrs. Findlay retired.

The incident did not tend to calm the minister's somewhat disturbed state of mind. He tried to resume his reading, but found himself constantly listening to catch the click of the gate latch, and the sound of footsteps on the gravel path up to the house. When more than an hour passed, and there were still no signs of Mrs. Findlay's return, he grew too uneasy to attempt any longer to occupy himself. The farm house of Castle Hill was hardly three miles from Mossiel. Mrs. Findlay must surely have gone the whole distance in search of her missing niece.

He wandered from room to room, and now and again to the front door to listen, for more than an hour, but still the silence was unbroken ; and it was nearly half-past eleven before he heard the gate swing suddenly back, and hasty footsteps approaching the house. He hurried at once to the door, reaching it almost at the same moment as the farmer from Castle Hill, Mr. Reid.

"Eh, Mr. Hepburn, but this is a sair piece o' wark ?" he said.

"What has happened ?"

"The lassie's clean disappeared, an' nae body can tell

the hoo or the why. I left Mrs. Findlay at the farm. She's like to gang oot o' her mind. We maun gang to the police station, sir."

"But what has happened! Did the girl never reach Castle Hill?"

"Oh, she was there, sure enough. I saw her mysel' in the afternoon. She cam' speerin' for her cousin Janet, an' they told her Janet was oot wi' the wean, an' likely wad be a wee bit up the burn, where I'd got the forester's leave to cut a wheen salpins for the sheep nets. She said she wad gang on an' seek her, out she never got that length, an' nae a saul that I can think to speer at set eyes upon her after she left the house. Her aunt's just ravin' on that she's aff wi' Rob Blackwood. I promised I wad gang there first, and then to the police."

"I'll come with you," said the minister hastily reaching down his hat and coat; and without a moment's delay they set out.

Their repeated summonses at length brought Maggie Blackwood to the door. Her account of her brother was clear enough, and she was evidently much too stupid and sleepy to have improvised it on the spot. Rob had gone early that morning, with a cart, to a farm some miles beyond Castle Hill. He meant to leave the cart there, and walk to another farm, where he had business, at some little distance; and she expected him home about the middle of the next day.

"The whole thing favours the possibility of an elopement," Mr. Hepburn said, as they walked away. "I think it would be a mistake to set the police on the alert until we see if Blackwood comes home to-morrow as expected."

"I'm quite o' yer mind, sir. If she's gang aff wi' him, there's nae gude makin' a scandal o't. I'll just gang hame, an' try an' persuade the auid leddy to bide quiet."

“Wait until I rouse up my man. He shall drive you home, and bring Mrs. Findlay back.”

Was it an elopement? Mr. Hepburn wondered as he awaited in his study the return of the dog-cart. The facts favoured such an hypothesis: but with the strange incidents of the forenoon fresh in his memory, it gave him no relief from a distinct dread which was laying momentarily stronger hold upon him. Yet, come what might, of these incidents he could not say one single word, lest questions might lead to further discoveries than he dared risk.

The dog-cart drove up at length, and Mrs. Findlay, denouncing Robert Blackwood, and not sparing a few oblique thrusts about his having been encouraged to come about the house, was at length persuaded to go off to her bed. But there was little sleep for anyone at the manse that night, and when he rose in the early morning Mr. Hepburn could not but see the haggard worn look on his own pale face.

Soon after mid-day Mr. Hepburn and Mr. Laing walked down to Blackwood's house. Robert had arrived shortly before with the cart. The Blackwood scowl gathered heavily upon his face when he was told of Mary's disappearance, but his own account of himself was perfectly unembarrassed.

He had been to the farm as his sister had described, but had not paid the second visit he had intended to make, hearing that the man he wished to see was too ill to receive him. He had therefore, he said, walked over the hills to some distance, to see a shepherd, who was an old friend; but had found the house locked up, the man and his wife both being out.

“Can you throw no possible light on what may have become of the girl, Blackwood?” Mr. Hepburn asked.

"Na, sir. I canna help ye."

"Do you think she has eloped?"

A strange look came over the man's face, and he was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I dinna think it. There's ae man nae missin' that wad hae been missin' had she been awa that way. But where she may be is mair than I can guess?"

"You seem to me to take her disappearance with strange coolness, Blackwood, considering the feelings you professed towards her."

"There's some things tak' awa a' yer power to feel, sir. I'd come to ken I need hope nae mair. I'll no say but I'll be easier the noo if she's awa athegether, an' I dinna see her ony mair."

Mr. Laing had been quietly watching Blackwood during this brief colloquy. As they walked away, he said gravely,

"Hepburn, that fellow knows more than he will allow."

"So I think."

"I should not in the least wonder if she has been carried off, not by, but for him. His account of himself is clear enough, and can easily be verified. But he is just the sort of a fellow for such exploit. In that ase she is probably safe enough, somewhere out at sea."

"Do not for any sake suggest that idea to her aunt--
Hulloa!"

The exclamation was due to a strange spectacle. They had come in sight of the manse at the moment, and a crowd assembled round the door.

"Something has turned up," said Mr. Laing, as they hastened towards the house.

"They've just ta'en her in, sir," said one of the crowd, as the minister came up.

“Who? What?” he asked.

“Mary Warrender, sir. The body was washed up wi’ the tide, the morn, an’ some o’ the men gangin’ down to the boats found it just abune high water mark.”

Without a word the two men passed into the house. There all was wild confusion. Mrs. Findlay in strong hysterics, a bevy of excited women sobbing and conjecturing by turns, Dr. Tweedie and Dr. Hewson, another Mossiel practitioner, talking in low tones to the police sergeant, and in a back room, which served as laundry, the poor pale cold form, still in its soaked sodden clothing, laid upon a long table.

“Now, my good people,” Mr. Hepburn said, quietly but firmly, “you must all clear out of this, if you please. There is, unfortunately, no need for any one save the doctors and the police. All this confusion is very trying for Mrs. Findlay, and annoying for the doctors. Mrs. Findlay, you must go up to your room at once and try to compose yourself. Mrs. Bell, kindly remain with Mrs. Findlay. Your daughter will, perhaps, stay in the kitchen in case of anything being wanted.”

The tone of quiet determination was very effectual. The house was speedily cleared, and Mrs. Findlay, moaning dismally, was conveyed upstairs by Mrs. Bell and her daughter.

“Is it really a case of drowning?” the minister asked, turning to the doctors.

“It looks like it, as far as a cursory glance can show,” Doctor Tweedie said; “but Hewson and I are just going to make an examination. Word has been sent to the Fiscal. The men who found the body are in your dining-room. The sergeant is going to question them while we are occupied.”

There was little that they could tell. Going down to their boats that morning they had come upon the body left on the sand by the receding tide. That was all they could say.

Then after a while the doctors sent for the sergeant to receive their report, and shortly returned with him to the dining-room, where Mr. Hepburn and Mr. Laing were anxiously awaiting their appearance. The case was clearly one of drowning, and the fact that there was not a bruise or scratch anywhere about the body to indicate any violence having been used, seemed to point clearly to some sudden accident. That was about the sum of the doctor's report. How the accident could have happened was wrapt in mystery. From the moment the girl had left the Castle Hill Farm, all trace of her seemed absolutely lost.

"What time did she leave the farm?" Mr. Hepburn asked.

"I cannot quite make out," the sergeant said. "Mr. Reid was here just now, but he is very uncertain at what time he saw her, and the byre woman only remembers that it was some time in the afternoon. But her cousin came in some time after five o'clock, and they are all sure it was a good while before then."

"It was shortly after five o'clock when I came over the bridge," the minister said. "She cannot have been anywhere about then, or I must have seen her."

"The old lady keeps raving on incessantly about Robert Blackwood," said the sergeant; "but she's in such a state, I don't think that its any good questioning her. Do you know what she's got in her head, sir?"

"Perfectly well. He has long wanted to marry the poor girl, and when she did not return home, her aunt at once took it into her head she had run away with him. But his account of himself seems clear enough."

"I'll verify that story," the sergeant said, on hearing what Blackwood had said. "I'll just wait till I get word from the Fiscal, and then start off. I'll go and see now if any message has come."

Dr. Hewson followed the sergeant, and the three other men were left together.

"Well, Hepburn, what do you say now?" asked Mr. Laing.

"It's a horrible business."

"No doubt of that. But how came it about? How long had she been in the water, Tweedie?"

"Certainly since the previous evening."

"Hepburn and I have been interviewing her fiery suitor, and we were both struck with an impression that he knew more than he chose to say. What are the chances that she was carried off at his instigation? and that she either fell, or was thrown overboard at sea?"

"Neither one nor the other, most decidedly."

"How do you know?"

"For the very good reason that she was drowned in fresh water. I really do not see why you should be trying to make a murder out of it. The case seems easy enough to account for plausibly. If the girl started in search of her cousin, she had to walk along a path very close to the edge of a precipitous bank, with the river running very heavily just below. A very slight accident could hardly fail to end fatally."

"And not even a scream?"

"That remains to be investigated. It could only have been one quick cry. There would not be time for more. Some one may have heard a cry. The sergeant will examine into all these points. But I must not linger here. I have a great deal to do, and this matter has taken up a long

time. Hepburn, you look as if this business had taken it out of you. Come and have some luncheon with Mrs. Tweedie and me. You'll be better not sitting by yourself,"

The minister, who had been sitting gazing abstractedly out of the window, roused himself, and, getting up, walked over to the other side of the room, and stood, leaning his elbow on the chimney-piece. "It is a horrible business," he said; "I cannot grasp it even yet. Moving about the house and doing her accustomed work not twenty-four hours since, and now lying there cold and still! But I will not go with you, Tweedie, thank you. I had better remain in the house. I may be wanted."

"Dr. Tweedie and Mr. Laing left the house together, and almost as soon as they had passed out of the gate, Mr. Laing said, in a low voice—

"There is some one besides Blackwood has something in his mind he does not choose to admit."

"It looks like it. But if he has any suspicions, why does he not speak?"

"Who can tell. But I wish to God he did not look as he does."

"How?"

"My dear Tweedie, just reflect a moment. Hepburn is unmarried, only eight-and-thirty years of age—a girl living in his house, and unquestionably very attractive in appearance, goes out in the afternoon, is known to be somewhere in the same direction as he is gone, and gets mysteriously drowned. And he looks as pale, haggard, and worn as any severe shock could well make a man look."

"Good God! Laing, you don't mean——"

"That I have any suspicion? Not the faintest. If Hepburn accused himself, I should only believe his mind had gone wrong. But do you suppose I am the only person

who will link all these circumstances together? Mark my words, Tweedie, this will be a far more serious business than the last. That rascal Cruickshanks will be down upon it like a vulture. Yet, for the life of me, I cannot see how we can do anything."

"I'll offer five hundred pounds for any information," exclaimed Dr. Tweedie, in great agitation.

"I'd offer a thousand if it would do any good. But it would only make bad worse. To show the least anxiety would just give fresh wings to scandal. Scandal is a thing you can't grapple. You might as well try to fence a fog with a rapier."

"Why should there be scandal about him?"

"Because all the people who are shams themselves hate him. Every one who is thorough, good or bad, likes him. Those who are not, instinctively feel that he sees through them. Forsyth was, I believe, as good and honest a man at heart as Hepburn himself; but he was weak and altogether without discernment. He took the people pretty much at their own valuation. Hepburn looks them through and through, and they naturally don't like it."

"Good Heavens! it's too horrible." The serious aspect of the case was growing rapidly on Dr. Tweedie.

"There is but one thing to fall back upon," said Mr. Laing, "as a last chance. If my fears are verified to any serious extent, I'll go and speak to Robert Blackwood. How on earth he has done it I can never understand—save that I am certain there is some mystery attached to that knocking down business—but Hepburn has completely won that fellow. I believe he'd lay down his life for him. His account, if verified, clears him. Still I am of opinion he knows or suspects something. He may have chances of lighting on a clue which we should never have. I believe

he would stop at nothing, if Hepburn's interests were in question."

"Come in then and talk it over with my wife. She'll hear all that's said sooner than we shall. We must put her on her guard."

Without the faintest perception of any sinister aspect of the case, as far as regarded himself, James Hepburn was, meantime sitting in his study, the prey of a throng of anxious thoughts. Blackwood's account of himself was so perfectly clear, and so easy of verification, that it was impossible to doubt its accuracy. Then who was his own unintending assailant in the woods? He was clearly, under the circumstances, the suspicious feature in the case. Yet of him the minister felt he dared not breathe a word; for who could tell where an investigation in that direction might end? What malignant fate seemed bent upon entangling him in ambiguous positions with regard to crime? Physically depressed by worry, anxiety, and want of rest, his musings were very gloomy that afternoon; and a strong wish began to grow up within him that he had never left his secluded country home, where such evils as he had to face were mostly of a negative rather than of a positive sort.

The police sergeant came to him again in the evening. He had been over to the farm Blackwood had named, and his account was unhesitatingly verified. He had been told there of the illness of the man he wished to see, and had announced his intention of walking over the hills to a distant shepherd's house. He had returned in the evening earlier than he was expected, and just about the time he would naturally be back if he found the house shut up. He had slept at the farm, and started with the cart just in time to reach Mossgiel by mid-day.

"I've just been down and seen him myself," the sergeant said.

"How did he receive you?"

The man laughed. "The Blackwoods are not the sort that care much for us coming about their places, sir. But he was civil enough, sour and short in his answers, but they were straightforward enough. I told him plainly I'd verified his story, but he only gave a sort of surly smile; and then I asked him whether, since he and the young woman were courting, he couldn't give any hints to guide us as to whether there had been anything wrong? He just thought a bit, and then said he didn't see anything but that it was just an accident. The Fiscal 'll be through to-morrow; but I don't see there'll be anything but for him to return it as an accident."

This verification of Blackwood's story seemed to render it absolutely certain that at the time of all the strange transactions of that momentous afternoon, he was miles away from either Strathellon or Mossgiel. The minister's perplexities increased. What, then, could be the meaning of the mysterious occurrence in the wood? Could it be possible that the skein was even a more tangled one than he deemed it? That there were two rivals mutually seeking each other's destruction; and that Sir Maurice Adair had been mistaken for Robert Blackwood? They were about the same height and weight, but there all possible resemblance ended. Still the minister did remember to have seen Blackwood wearing a suit much the color of the one Sir Maurice had worn that afternoon; and where the under cover was thick, a mistake might have been possible. Such a theory seemed to throw some light upon Blackwood's strangely perverted moral theories, for certainly the case was somewhat different if he was only seeking the life of a

man who was bent on taking his life, should the chance arise. It all seemed more tangled and confused the longer he thought of it ; and all his speculations came back at last to the words he murmured, half aloud, as he rose to seek the repose he sorely needed. " If only, poor lassie, you could tell me you had come fairly by your end ! "

CHAPTER XIX.

CONFIDENCES.

IT is piteous, in such a case, that cold, marble stillness and unbreakable silence of the only being who could solve such anxious questionings. Every inquiry was hopelessly baffled. The most careful examination of the river bank yielded no results; and no one had heard, or would admit having heard, a sound. A little comparing of notes as to the time at which Mary Warrender had left the manse, and the time which she had stayed at the farm, seemed to render it pretty clear that it could not have been later than half-past four when she started to seek her cousin; therefore, James Hepburn was very well aware that he, at that moment, was a long way off,

A clear case of accidental drowning, the Fiscal said. Had she been drowned in the sea the case would have been different, and much more suspicious. But on that point the doctor's evidence was positive. The drowning had taken place in fresh water; and she was known to have started from the farm with the intention of following a path where an accident was very likely to happen. There seemed to be no possible circumstance to suggest that the death had been due to anything save accident, especially considering that the girl was not known to possess an enemy in the world.

It was strange to James Hepburn how much he missed her. Her fresh, pretty young face, and light active movements, had brightened up the somewhat silent manse more than he had been himself aware; and she had always

been most careful in her attentions to all his comforts. Mrs. Findlay's gloomy countenance and dismal sighings did not tend to lessen the saddening effect of the change; and her grief, being constantly fed by the reflection that had Mary only lived until she was twenty-one she could have made a will, and secured to her aunt the revision of her little fortune, seemed likely to be perennial.

Through all those trying days the minister had found time to ponder anxiously over Lady Ellinor Farquharson. What was to be his own line of action? There he felt himself utterly at a loss from want of any idea what her action would be. When the excitement of the moment was passed, would resentment spring up? And would the action forced upon him by the exigencies of the moment simply close the door upon all future chance of making any effort on her behalf?

On that point his doubts were soon set at rest. On the day of poor Mary Warrender's funeral a note was brought to him from Lady Ellinor. She had been, she said, dreadfully shocked at hearing what had happened, and had, in consequence of the accident, delayed writing to ask him to come and see her. Would he send back word by the bearer when it would be convenient for him to call, as she was anxious to see him? With a deep-drawn breath of relief he hastily wrote an answer, naming an early day.

He started on foot, and almost immediately after turning in at the lodge gates of Strathellon he met General Farquharson, also walking. The General cordially welcomed him.

"I thought we were never going to see you, Mr. Hepburn, and was pleased to hear from Lady Ellinor that she expected you this afternoon. This is a sad business you have had at the manse."

"More than sad ; it is horrible."

"You are right. But—I am afraid there is a flaw in our moral sentiments somewhere—I don't think we should have been so impressed if it had been the aunt, instead of the niece, although she is a most worthy person. I remember her quite well at Strathellon, years ago, when I was quite a young fellow, she was a most excellent servant, but her appearance was not singularly attractive, which I must allow her niece's was. Of course I noticed her particularly at the ball ; a singularly pretty bright looking girl. I am afraid, Mr. Hepburn, that has something to do with our feelings."

"And why not ? Beauty in any form has an irresistible attraction ; but moral beauty will carry the day, any time, General, where our feelings towards the dead are in question. The poor lassie had physical beauty, certainly, and Mrs Findlay, though a worthy respectable woman, has not moral beauty. That just constitutes all the difference."

"Well, yes, I suppose there is something in that. But do you fully believe, Mr. Hepburn, it was an accident ?"

"Don't ask me. I cannot bear to think about it. It is useless. There is not the faintest shadow of evidence to the contrary, and yet I have a distinct perception that accident was not probable under the circumstances."

"Ah ! that is just what every one feels, I believe. It strikes me it is a very fortunate circumstance that a certain person we wot of can account for himself so clearly. But I am keeping you standing. I will turn and walk part of the way up to the house with you. I am in no hurry, and there is another matter I wish to speak to you about."

He turned as he spoke, and they walked slowly along the approach together. General Farquharson was silent for a few moments. Then he said a trifle abruptly—

“You have not, I think, seen Lady Ellinor since her return from England?”

“Only for a few moments,” replied the somewhat startled minister. “I met her one afternoon out walking, and spoke to her. That is the only time I have seen her.”

Again General Farquharson was silent for a moment. Then he said—

“How did you think her looking when you saw her?”

“The question is difficult to answer General Farquharson, for to tell the honest truth, horribly uncouth though I fear I must appear to you, I was not thinking about her looks, and observed them very little.”

General Farquharson smiled, but it was a grave smile. “We will not impeach your character for gallantry to Lady Ellinor,” he said, “though, in truth, I am not sure she would not be attracted, rather than the reverse. Admiration is rather a monotonous offering at her shrine. But, to tell you the truth, Mr. Hepburn, I am not quite easy about her. I trust I have never been blind to the responsibilities I voluntarily incurred in marrying a very beautiful woman, so very much younger than myself. I can most honestly say that it has been, ever since, the chief study of my life to ensure Lady Ellinor’s happiness, as far as possible. In fact, no one knows at what an amount of personal anxiety I have endeavoured to give full consideration to her wishes. Her love of both riding and driving rather mettlesome horses has cost me hours of intense anxiety, yet I have never interfered, save in one or two instances where non-interference would have amounted to positive culpability: and in all our arrangements I have, in every way, sought, as far as I could ascertain them, to give full effect to her wishes. Yet sometimes, and more especially of late I have feared I have not been quite so suc-

cessful as I could wish. Lady Ellinor has seemed to me occasionally a little out of spirits, and I have thought her pale, and a little worn looking ; and she is certainly more fitful and excitable in her mood."

"Pardon me for interrupting you, General Farquharson," broke in the sorely harrassed minister, "but with what object are you speaking thus to me? Surely I am not a fitting recipient for such confidences?"

"Let me finish what I was going to say, and then I think you will better understand. Only yesterday I spoke to Lady Ellinor, and told her I thought her looking not well, and a little out of spirits, and begged her to tell me if she had the least wish ungratified, which it was in my power to carry out. She seemed much agitated, and spoke in a way which caused me much pain. She was very bitter and sarcastic, said all women were alike, never knew when they were well off, and never made good wives unless they married brutes who positively ill-used them, then they clung to them with most unshaken devotion ; and that she wished I would ill-use her, and then perhaps she would make a better wife. Her whole mood seemed to me strained and unreal, and was very painful to me. It was after that conversation I resolved to speak to you, Mr. Hepburn. You have Lady Ellinor's confidence and respect to a most unusual degree. How thoroughly I share her sentiments, I think my present line of action will abundantly testify. In conversation with her you may chance to find out whether it is possible any change in our habits, or mode of life, would conduce to Lady Ellinor's happiness. In that case I shall feel for ever indebted to you if you will speak openly to me. I should be sorry to give up Strathellon ; but I would not allow that thought to weigh with me for a

moment, if I thought Lady Ellinor's happiness was at stake. There is nothing I would not sacrifice, rather than feel she had any cause to regret having trusted her happiness in my hands. I will leave you now," he added, as they approached the house. "You will, I know, aid me in this anxiety, if you possibly can."

He rang the bell as he spoke, and the instant appearance of servants prevented Mr. Hepburn from making any reply, beyond wishing his tormentor good afternoon. And almost before he had time even to collect his confused and startled senses, he found himself in Lady Ellinor Farquharson's presence.

She met him with perfect calmness and self-possession. On that point at least she was thoroughly a woman of the world, but as he looked at her, even through a slightly varying colour, he saw there was a change in her. Her face had lost something of its brightness, and there was a perceptible shade under her eyes. She greeted him cordially, saying, as she looked anxiously at him, "How dreadfully worn and haggard you are looking! This has been a terrible shock to you I fear."

"It has indeed. All the more because for all there does not seem the least thing to indicate foul play, I cannot shake off an uneasy dread as to whether the poor girl really came fairly by her end."

"I am very, very sorry," she said gently. "All the more because, I fear, you had quite enough to worry you without this painful addition. I have so wished to see you, but I did not like to claim your attention until this sad business was settled. I want to get rid of all unpleasant memories lingering from our last meeting."

"Your parting words, Lady Ellinor," he said in a low voice, "took away all the unpleasantness for me, by showing you were not angry with me."

Then she dropped the momentary assumption of almost unconcern with which she had broken the ice, and spoke earnestly and sadly.

"I should be the most despicable of women if I felt towards you anything but the deepest gratitude. But just because of that gratitude, and the sincere regard I feel for you, I am anxious you should rightly understand, so that you may not think me more in fault than I was. But, first, will you tell me one thing?"

"What?"

"Do you think that any one, save yourself, had seen Sir Maurice?"

The question lifted a great weight of anxiety off him, and with remorseless indifference to all questions of Jesuitism, he perpetrated at once the pious fraud of quietly acquiescing in a misapprehension which avoided all risk of any further questions as to how he had gained his information. "I do not believe," he said, "that anyone, save myself, met Sir Maurice that afternoon."

"I am very glad. It was a mad, on my part, a wicked thing. But," she hesitated a moment, "have you ever gone through such experience, Mr. Hepburn, as to know what it is not to see, or at least not to recognise, the full bearings of your own action, in some case, until it is suddenly placed before you in the light in which it strikes some disinterested observer?"

"I am not sure that I have, in actual fact," he replied. "But it has been too long a sacred duty with me to study human nature to the utmost of my ability, for me not perfectly to understand so frequent an occurrence."

"Ah! I am glad you understand. I cannot tell you what a shock it gave me to see what you felt, and hear all you said. Your view of the danger was exaggerated, indeed

it was ; but I was wrong—very wrong—to promise to grant that one interview. I fully intended then to tell Sir Maurice that it must never be repeated. But”—she paused again, and coloured painfully.

With him all perception of personality had vanished, lost in intense realization of the human soul in sore need of the guidance which it was his special duty to provide. “Speak openly, Lady Ellinor,” he said gravely. “Remember that what you say now is as sacred as though spoken to the most conscientious keeper of the secrets of the confessional.”

“Well, what I mean is, Mr. Hepburn,” and her voice was slightly tremulous, “you must not altogether take what I said in the excitement of the moment as true. I have bitterly reproached myself since, for conveying a false and most cruelly unjust impression. I do not like speaking of my husband—there seems a sort of disloyalty in doing it even to you ; but my own fault, in saying I was miserable, forces me to do so. You will quite understand that marriage opens the door for the possibility of many sorrows and troubles of which it is difficult to speak. A kinder, more indulgent husband than General Farquharson woman never had ; but still there is a great difference in our ages ; perhaps, altogether, our temperaments are not very well suited, and I have not been altogether happy. You must believe me, when I tell you that Sir Maurice Adair has always treated me with the most perfect respect ; has never allowed himself to forget that I am General Farquharson’s wife ; and yet, in a thousand ways, he has shown that he understood and felt for me. I should be the coldest-hearted of women if I did not feel grateful to him, and it was really in order to show my gratitude and confidence that I promised what he asked.”

"One moment, Lady Ellinor. Will you tell me what reason Sir Maurice assigned for venturing on such a request?"

"Only the wish to talk, without risk of being interrupted, over some idle rumour about himself, causing a good deal of mischief among some common friends of ours, which he thought I might be able, in some measure, to undo."

"And do you believe that was really his sole object?"

She raised her beautiful, truthful eyes to his face, and replied firmly, "No, not now. I firmly believed it then, and I still fully believe he had persuaded himself that was his sole object. But now, when I realize the madness of the whole proceeding, I cannot quite credit it."

"Then, Lady Ellinor, there is the very source of all danger; mutual self-deception with regard to your feelings towards each other, until a terrible catastrophe shall undeceive you both when too late. It is no difficult matter for anyone, who is neither devoid of, nor has outlived all human feeling, to understand what is the aching void, the unsatisfied yearning of a nature so capable as yours of deep, passionate devotion. This void Sir Maurice Adair proposes to himself to fill with a devotion which he sophistically seeks to persuade himself is blameless, so long as it is blameless in action: but which, in its mere existence, is a sin, when offered to the wife of another man. And you, too, are misleading yourself, trying to believe such a position blameless, and possible to remain unchanged. I should be utterly false to my sacred office, did I not at once tell you that you are both sinning, in indulging any such sentiments as are clearly gaining a constantly increasing hold upon you both. Their mere existence is a sin, which is weakening your moral force, and paving the way for more grievous sin. No woman is safe

or blameless who accepts the most fully merited sympathy, where her husband is in question, from any man, save a father or a brother. You are both deluding yourselves as to the nature of the feelings you are encouraging, and to what has that fact already led you? Sir Maurice asks, and you agree to an act which the merest accident might have caused to become a lasting stain upon your name; the source of an irreparable breach between your husband and yourself. Does not the very madness of the risk, which you yourself admit, prove that the sentiment which made you blind to it, for the moment, must be a more dangerously misleading one than you will even now allow?"

Her eyes flashed and her cheek crimsoned. She was not used to such plain speaking. "You are a stern censor, Mr. Hepburn," she said.

"Not stern, Lady Ellinor. God forbid. Do you think, at this very moment, I could not offer you a deeper, more heartfelt, sympathy than Sir Maurice Adair can lay at your feet, because it would be a more purely unselfish one, save for the knowledge that all such sympathy carries with it an insidious poison? Should the time ever come that any sacrifice on my part can really benefit you, you will know then, whether or not there is any sternness in my feelings towards you. It is only so long as I see you still inclined to cling to a deadly delusion, that I may spare no effort, even if it be one that pains and wounds you, to arouse you to a sense of your danger."

"What would you have me do?" she asked, in an almost inaudible voice.

"In the first place, give credence to the truth; which is, that under this cold reserved exterior, your husband cherishes a far deeper, warmer love for you than you at all imagine. In the second place, avoid entirely all association

with Sir Maurice Adair, until such time as you can feel his society has no very special attraction for you."

She shook her head. "I might do the last; but believe the first—no, it is impossible. I must be the clearest judge on that point."

"No, Lady Ellinor. The very bitterness of your own most natural disappointment rises up like a thick mist between you and the truth. Strive, I beseech you, to give credence to what less deeply interested eyes can perceive, or assuredly, sooner or later, you will learn it amid the keen anguish of a life long remorse."

"Hush," she said suddenly, and instantaneously he caught the sound of approaching footsteps. The door opened, and General Farquharson came in.

"Ellinor, my love," he said, "I am not going to let you remain at home all this lovely afternoon. I have ordered the waggonette, and Mr. Hepburn will go with us for a drive; and return, I hope, to dinner."

"Not this evening, thank you, General. I must be home by six o'clock."

"Then, we will drive round by the manse, and leave you there on our way home. Go and get ready, dear child," he said, laying his hand with a most paternally affectionate manner on Lady Ellinor's shoulder, "and let me see if the fresh air will not bring some colour into those pale cheeks."

"I will be ready in a few moments," Lady Ellinor said, in a somewhat hurried tone, as she rather abruptly left the room. James Hepburn had turned away, chafing under a feeling almost bordering on shame, as though some shade of discredit attached to the painful position into which he had been forced. But he had little time to think. General Farquharson turned to him the moment the door closed.

"You must surely see what I mean, Mr. Hepburn; that Lady Ellinor is not quite herself; a little worn and pale."

He would feign have had a few moments for reflection; but he could do no more than try to give due weight to all the varied flashes of thought for which there was time, while the slower process of speech went on.

"Yes," he said, "I do see a change in Lady Ellinor. This is the first time I have had a chance of really observing her carefully since the night of your servants' ball in the autumn. She does not look so bright and well as she did then."

"I wish I could see what it is best to do," General Farquharson said anxiously — "Lady Ellinor does not care for a London season. We are generally in London for a fortnight or three weeks, and she is always glad to get away."

During that brief space James Hepburn had taken his resolution, and he spoke firmly.

"None the less, I think you will be well to try change of any sort. Life here is rather secluded. It is quite possible that, unconsciously to herself, Lady Ellinor stands in need of both more variety, and more society. Patients are not always, themselves, the best judges of the remedies most suitable for them. I am convinced you will do well to try and bring her under the influence of fresh scenes, and fresh acquaintances."

"There is yachting," replied the General. She is fond of the sea."

"Nothing could be better, I should say."

"If we could get up a nice party," he went on thoughtfully. "A *solitude à deux*, on board a yacht, would hardly be a panacea for dullness. I think I might arrange it. Only I fear I must leave out," he added with a laugh, "one of the the best yachting companions I know."

"Whom?"

"Sir Maurice Adair. He has a fund of life and spirits about him which makes him invaluable for a yachting party. But I am afraid he is a little inclined to singe his wings. For his own sake it is hardly fair to place temptation in his way, for he is a most honourable man."

Now he had his chance, given to him in a most unforeseen way. He spoke gravely, almost sternly. "You have, by your own action, General Farquharson, invited my interference in your domestic affairs. You must forgive my speaking very plainly. I think the wrong of such an action would be to Lady Ellinor. My own opinion is that for some time your perfect faith in her has been leading you to place her in a false position."

"Mr. Hepburn!" What can you mean?"

"That you do not give sufficient weight to the fact that a woman possessed of such unusual beauty and charm as Lady Ellinor, when married to a man much older than herself, is always specially the mark for scandal and malice. You fail in your duty when you throw upon her the onus of keeping always within due bonds the admiration she cannot fail to attract, and of which the slightest exhibition is sure to be the theme for a thousand ill-natured observations. I will dare to go further, and tell you that Sir Maurice Adair's admiration for Lady Ellinor has been commented upon. It was observed at the Election ball, last year, that she had to hold him in check. You must forgive me if I carry the liberty you have accorded me so far as to say, that I think the gravest of possible failures on your part, in those responsibilities which you admit a man takes on himself, in marrying a beautiful woman so much his junior in age, would be in your encouraging any sort of intimate association between Lady Ellinor and Sir Maurice Adair."

“I—, I can hardly understand—.”

I mean that attentions which would hardly be noticed were you a young man nearer Lady Ellinor's own age, are certain to be observed and commented on under the circumstances. If you encourage Sir Maurice Adair's visits, you may easily place her in the painful position of feeling that scandal is likely to be excited by attentions which she would yet feel it difficult to repel without seeming to attach too much importance to them. Various slight circumstances make me think you will be taking a most judicious step in putting an end, for the present, to all intercourse between Lady Ellinor and Sir Maurice Adair.”

“You amaze me, Mr. Hepburn. I never thought. But see, there comes the carriage. Let us go. I will think over what you have said. At any rate I thank you heartily for having been so out-spoken. You bring back to my mind most vividly and startlingly a brief conversation I had with Lady Ellinor just after that ball. You have been a true friend, and again I thank you. Come, I hear Lady Ellinor's voice in the hall.”

It was the utmost he could dare to say, for almost every sentence he uttered was fraught with eminent danger of some betrayal of confidence most sacred, and yet most repugnant to him. There seemed to him something almost approaching dishonour in the bare fact of being aware of both circumstances and sentiments strongly influencing Lady Ellinor Farquharson's matrimonial relations to her husband, of which that husband, to whom they were of such unspeakable importance, was wholly unsuspecting. He grimly smiled, even, at the thought of Himself, the Free Church minister, thus thrust into the very position of a confessor. But would the use he had tried to make of his knowledge be of any avail? He hoped, or tried to hope,

he might have succeeded in cutting off the head of this particular weed. But so long as General Farquharson continued utterly blind to the temperament and needs of his young wife, what hope was there but that other weeds would spring up? Some day both would awake to a discovery of the fatal mistake which was sapping the foundations of their peace and happiness. But would it not be to the wail of that dismal dirge, *too late!*

As in all men of strong tender chivalrous nature, there was in James Hepburn a deep well spring of romance; and as he pondered over the whole subject, in the light of that heartfelt devotion to Ellinor Farquharson, which he knew in his inmost soul to be too pure to let him shrink from admitting it fully to himself, there grew up within him that ardent wish, which is in itself the most fervent of prayers, that he might be himself her saviour, at the cost of any sacrifice even of life itself; if only he might know before he died, that he had saved her; had rescued her from the perils which were thickening around her, and that her happiness was firmly established upon a solid and lasting basis.

CHAPTER XX.

MUTTERINGS OF THE STORM.

A GREAT stillness seemed to lie upon society in Mosgiel, but it was not altogether a wholesome stillness. It was more akin to that ominous hush of nature under which animals are apt to become restless and uneasy, and, as is often the case with that hush, it was broken now and again by the rustle and stir of a sudden breath passing across it and dying away again.

These momentary stirrings of the social atmosphere usually took the form of great gatherings of women at one another's houses for afternoon tea, gatherings from which the daughters of the house, if there chanced to be any, were rigorously excluded. They had proved themselves valuable opportunities for the interchange of thought and opinion, and had really, without any distinct organization, established themselves upon a regular and systematic basis.

Mrs. Campbell had never forgiven Mr. Hepburn for what she was pleased to term his abominable rudeness; and no sooner did she hear of the manse tragedy than she set off to discuss the whole bearings of the question with Mrs. Watson. She had no very definite idea as to exactly what had happened, but there seemed to be a certain shade of discredit involved in the bare fact that a manse should be the scene of any incident necessitating the intervention of the police and the procurator-fiscal. That the girl's body had been found on the beach was about all she knew; but she felt very sure that young women in service in ministers'

houses ought not to be on the beach under any circumstances likely to result in their being drowned.

But Mrs. Watson was in a very much more forward state of both information and righteous indignation. Mr. Cruickshanks had heard of the tragedy with extreme but wholly misdirected satisfaction from the very first moment. He was very well aware of Robert Blackwood's relations to the girl and of his fiery jealousy; and he had little doubt it would turn out that he had made away with her in some access of jealous frenzy. This would of course lead to Blackwood's removal from Mossgiel, an occurrence which appeared to Mr. Cruickshanks quite worth the murder of a girl who was never in the least likely to be of the slightest consequence to himself. As long as Blackwood persisted in his, as Mr. Cruickshanks viewed it, extraordinary infatuation for the minister, that worthy elder felt that he lived with a sword suspended over his head by a cord, many strands of which, he felt convinced, must have been cut by his own untimely outburst of temper; for the possibility of the minister not retaining a revengeful memory of the insulting remark levelled at him was one of a nature not easy for Mr. Cruickshanks to grasp.

But when the real circumstances of the transaction came to his knowledge then he exulted with great exultation. To get rid of Robert Blackwood was a thing greatly to be desired; but to get rid of the minister—the possibility almost took his breath away. With faculties quickened by dread he grasped all the circumstances of the case as clearly and rapidly as Mr. Laing had predicted, and every fresh sight of the minister's grave, thoughtful, pre-occupied face filled him with new joy. His enemy seemed actually to be giving himself into his hands, for what could be simpler or more natural than to express constantly his regret at seeing Mr.

Hepburn apparently failing so much both in health and spirits, and having thus drawn out the almost certain rejoinder, that he had had a great shock, to reply by little more than significant gestures, which would lose nothing of their effect by being susceptible of varied interpretations. Fearless moral courage was not a characteristic his own experience enabled him to picture vividly to himself, and it seemed to him that any minister, involved in such an entanglement as the present one must ere long find himself in a position which would make him very glad to resign. From this point of view Mr. Hepburn's possession of private fortune became a pleasing subject of reflection. It would remove many difficulties which might beset other ministers in taking such a step.

These tactics he had tried with great success on Mrs. Watson. He was glad of an opportunity of testing their efficiency in the first instance on a person sure under any circumstances to take a correct view of the subject. It was a sort of preliminary practice, calculated to insure the use of his weapons deftly and easily in more important cases.

Mrs. Watson was much in Mrs. Campbell's state of mind when she chanced to enter Mr. Cruickshank's shop just to talk a little over things in general. But though Mr. Cruickshank did not suggest one single fact, she left it, she herself declared, with her blood fairly congealed with horror.

A great moral darkness seemed to be looming before her, out of which stood distinct only the minister's figure; all the rest were but dim, shadowy suggestions of appalling possibilities. It chanced to be too late that day for her to seek sympathetic communion with any other kindred spirit, and it was on the very next afternoon that Mrs. Campbell appeared in search of information.

The conference was long, and out of it grew that never

definitely organized system of procedure which was found to answer so admirably. Forages in all directions, or careful examination and critical consideration of spoil already accumulated, became the occupation of the hour, with every now and again a little social gathering to hear fresh news or take into consideration newly excogitated aspects of the question. Nor was Mrs. Campbell the only outsider who was drawn into the vortex of speculation. Within a month after Mary Warrender had been laid in her grave all, or pretty near all, society in Mossgiel was in a state of suppressed ferment. Mrs. Lorrimer, having chanced to be away from home for about ten days, was one of the last initiated. She was rather a blunt, outspoken woman when the fancy took her, and she insisted on an unveiled frankness of statement which had always been tacitly avoided.

"I do wish," she said, turning round from the tea table, sugar-tongs in hand, after some artfully involved remark from Mrs. Haigg, "that you would say outright what it is you do suspect. Everyone has a hint or a shrug, or a half suggestion ready, but I've never yet heard anyone say out what is suspected"

"Well, really, my dear Mrs. Lorrimer," replied Mrs. Watson, "when we give you the facts surely you can draw the inferences for yourself?"

"I suppose you mean then that you actually believe Mr. Hepburn made away with the girl."

"Oh, that is putting it too strongly. But just consider the facts. The girl started to go along the river bank, within an hour from the time when Mr. Hepburn admits he was on the bridge. Moreover, he was seen from Castle Hill Farm walking along the road in a very downcast, moody sort of way. The girl is never seen alive again, and everyone can see how changed Mr. Hepburn is in appearance since that day'

“ But his coming along the road is nothing. I dare say if you asked you would find a dozen people had done the same. I suppose he had been visiting in that direction.”

“ No, indeed,” put in Mrs. Haigg, “ that is another suspicious feature in the case. He had not been visiting. I was determined, if it were possible to clear him it should be done, and I have been personally to every house in that direction, on one pretext or another, and he was not at one of them that day. One lad passed across the bridge while he was standing on it, looking very earnestly over the parapet down into the water. But not a soul besides knows anything about what he was doing that afternoon.”

“ Well, but men in their sober senses don't playfully take up people like stones and throw them into rivers. What object could he have ? ”

The virtuous matrons all looked at one another, with varying degrees of appreciativeness of the question.

“ Really, my dear,” Mrs. Watson said, “ You are assuming too much girlish inexperience. As I said before, take the facts, and draw your own inferences. Mr. Hepburn is a bachelor ; the girl was young, pretty and giddy, and they were living in the same house.”

“ But, after all, you know, that is only one hypothesis,” put in Mrs. Campbell. “ He may be only accessory after the fact, and be keeping silence to shield, probably in the case, his great friend Robert Blackwood. But I think myself it is quite impossible to avoid the conclusion, looking at all the facts, that Mr. Hepburn knows something about the matter which he is holding back. And that in itself is, I think, very discreditably to a minister.”

“ My husband thinks,” said Mrs. Wylie, “ if he was wise, he would resign at once.”

“ Well, he'll have to go,” said Mrs. Haigg, “ sooner or

later, there can be no doubt of that. And it would certainly be better to resign than to be turned out. It is fortunate the poor man has some private means, for it is clear the end of his ministerial career is not very far off."

These were the increasing ripples of an ever widening circle from that central agitation which Mr. Cruickshanks took good care should be actively maintained, and which he watched with constantly increasing satisfaction, and conviction that his enemy was given into his hands by a quiet marked occurrence of Providential circumstances. Whatever happened, now, he felt certain that Mr. Hepburn's resignation of his post could only be a matter of time.

And all this time James Hepburn had not the faintest suspicion of what was astir. The death of poor Mary Warrender lay heavy on his soul, for try as he might he could not establish there any credence of the opinion that she had come fairly by her end; and the necessity for him to keep silence regarding a circumstance not unlikely, he thought, to prove a clue which, carefully followed up, might clear up the matter, was inexpressibly bitter to him. In his secret musings he sometimes felt almost disposed to accept for himself Mrs. Campbell's alternative, and call himself an accessory after the fact.

Strathellon also was a heavy burden upon him. A most kind and cordial note from General Farquharson, thanking him with manly candour for his plain speaking, had told him that the yachting expedition was a settled thing, and that they were leaving Strathellon at once, and should be away for at least six months. So far so good, perhaps that particular weed was uprooted; but none the less the minister sighed more than he rejoiced whenever he thought of Lady Ellinor, and her loving, upright, but terribly obtuse and inveterately military husband. All these depressing consider-

ations, naturally, by no means tended to decrease that air of gravity, almost of gloom, which was being so eagerly watched.

The faithful friends who were cognizant of all that was afloat were growing daily more anxious and uneasy.

"It is not the least use of trying to be blind to the fact," Mr. Laing said, discussing the matter at the Tweedies, "that the circumstances are a little awkward. There is nothing that any rational human being would hold worth a thought, in the case of a man of Hepburn's character. But there is just enough for malice to lay hold of, and prop up scandal with. And that is just what the old rascal Cruickshanks knows."

"Is not the time come for your last chance?" asked Dr. Tweedie.

"Not yet, I think. You see Blackwood is a terribly uncertain quantity. He is as headstrong as any mule. Once take him into confidence, we have not the slightest power of controlling his action. If he chanced to take it into his head to go and threaten to blow Cruickshanks's brains out, it would be an offence against the law which one could easily condone. But it would not help this case."

"Besides," put in Mrs. Tweedie, "it will not do to show too great eagerness in hunting up evidence in Mr. Hepburn's favour. It would seem half like an admission of doubt. But should not something be said to him? I do not believe he has the faintest idea what is going on. It will give him a terrible shock if it comes upon him suddenly."

"I had been thinking of that," replied Mr. Laing; "but I hardly think the time is come for that step either. It is just possible, even yet, the scandal may die out, though I do not think it probable. I don't think any action can be

taken of any consequence without our getting scent of it in time to warn Hepburn. But I wish to Heaven the thing was settled some way. I don't think I have slept soundly a single night since that poor girl was drowned."

In this uncertain state the matter hung on for some time longer, waiting for one of these trivial accidents which, in the end, are generally the immediate causes of great explosions. And at last that accident occurred, in the apparently innocent circumstance of the minister taking up a wrong book by mistake.

He was reading, and chanced upon what he thought was a wrong quotation. Reaching over to a book-rack for a small volume he wanted to consult, he accidentally took, instead of it, the Free Church Hymnal. Forthwith the thought flashed upon him that that meeting, which had been so obviously the mouse brought forth by the mountain in labour, had been adjourned to that day six months. Surely the date was drawing near enough to render it strange he had heard nothing about it? He consulted his pocket book. It was even so. The day six months was not many weeks ahead. What, he somewhat cynically questioned with himself, could this strange apathy portend, in a case where a fierce wrangle might be confidently anticipated?

A meeting of the kirk-session was to be held the next evening, and he resolved then to mention the subject. There was not a very great deal of business to be got through; but he was very soon aware that in some way things were not quite as they should be—that something was adrift some where. He was not slow to feel the influence of subtle conditions, and he was very conscious, all through the course of the meeting, of something not quite as usual in the moral atmosphere. Some of the members were visibly constrained—some far too ostentatiously quite at their ease; and while

some of the usually talkative members seemed disposed to be silent, others not generally forward in taking active part in the business, seemed inclined to be officiously energetic.

When the regular business was disposed of, Mr. Hepburn spoke of the adjourned meeting, and the fact that the day for it to be held was not far distant. Instantly a great moral chill fell upon the assembly. For a moment there was a dead pause; then, as if conscious of its strangeness, Mr. Watson, with evidently assumed carelessness, said—

“Well, yes. That is true enough. But I don’t know that the meeting need positively be held all the same. I don’t know how it may be with others; but I haven’t heard any wish about it expressed of late. In fact, I think the whole question has rather dropped out of mind.”

“That is quite my opinion, sir,” said Mr. Cruickshanks, with emphatic solemnity. “I believe the question has been quite lost sight of lately, and I for one must say I think it would be a very great pity if it should be brought up again at present. What do you say, sir?” and he turned pointedly to Mr. Laing, whom he carefully avoided addressing, as a usual thing. Mr. Laing perfectly understood the under current of malice, and hit out savagely.

“I don’t know what I think, but I know what I most devoutly hope; and that is, that whenever the meeting is held, the congregation will not make itself quite so confoundedly ridiculous as on the last occasion.”

A hesitating remark from another member was lost in a shuffle of uprising, and sudden discovery that every one had urgent reason for wishing to get home at once, as the regular business before the meeting was settled. And in a wonderfully short space of time the minister and Mr. Laing found themselves in the street on their way home.

“Laing, what in the name of fortune does all this mean?” asked Mr. Hepburn.

Mr. Laing made no answer for the moment. He was rapidly calculating relative values. Then he said, gravely—

“It means what it will give you a great shock to hear, Hepburn. But it is time you should be told. I will come with you to the manse.”

“Not Lady Ellinor?” he said, in an agitated tone.

“Oh, no. Nothing of the least consequence to any one save yourself.”

“Then I’m all right,” he said—a horrible dread lifted off him, that their meeting in the wood had been observed and misconstrued.

Seated in the manse study, Mr. Laing, with legal clearness and precision, explained to him the whole case, emphasizing, as the pivot on which the whole turned, Cruickshanks’s ardent desire to make Mossgiel so intolerable to him that he should be forced to resign.

James Hepburn’s face grew very stern as the recital went on, but he never interrupted or showed a symptom of any emotion. After Mr. Laing had ceased speaking, he still sat silent, gazing thoughtfully into the empty grate.

“What are you thinking about, Hepburn?” Mr. Laing asked at length.

“I was revolving the question whether a reputation from boyhood, which is what the world terms perfectly unblemished, ought to be held sufficient evidence against the chance of a man who has been thirteen years in holy orders seducing an innocent girl, and then murdering her, to save exposure, I suppose. Upon my word I can’t quite make up my mind.”

“My dear fellow, you don’t suppose people really believe it?”

“The answer to that depends on the answer to the first question. If you rule that evidence not sufficient, I don’t

see why they shouldn't believe it. The circumstances are awkward, to say the least of it."

"But good heavens, Hepburn, you don't mean that now you know what is going on, you cannot upset it all by proving where you were, and what you were doing?"

The minister turned a curious glance upon him. "That is just what I cannot do, Laing," he replied calmly, "and that is the strong point in the whole case. Sitting here, I can tell you exactly what I was doing. I was away up the valley, in the Strathellon wood; far up in the private grounds. But you see I cannot bring trees and stones to bear witness to the fact, and as it seems such an exceedingly unlikely thing for me to be occupied in strolling about a wood, I don't think a true account of my whereabouts would much mend matters."

Mr. Laing sat aghast. If the minister could not prove positively that he was far from the spot at the time, he had at least never doubted that he would be able to produce some account of his doings, plausible in itself, and at least susceptible of indirect proof. But this was terrible! That on that day, of all days in the year, he should have been occupied in such an unusual and absolutely unproveable manner, seemed to him like the action of a malignant fate. After another brief spell of silence, Mr. Hepburn remarked,

"Cruikshanks may succeed, after all."

"No, faith, not if mortal effort can prevent it. But I am taken aback, Hepburn, I admit. It is an unfortunate coincidence. Tell me what you think of doing?"

The minister rose, and drawing back a curtain looked out into the darkness of the summer night for a brief space. Then he came and sat down again, saying—

"No, Laing, I think not. I am not yet entirely resolved as to what course I shall follow. But at any rate, I

will not have no man's advice, least of all that of a personal friend like yourself. This is not a matter in which I ought to be considered at all. The credit of the Church and the welfare of the congregation are the only points to be kept in view. Your personal friendship for myself, my consciousness of which, remember, Laing, is a great support to me in a strangely trying moment, would none the less interfere with your judgment in the matter. Neither am I myself quite a fitting judge. I must find some course which will as far as possible insure a decision on those two issues alone."

"Hepburn, it is preposterous. A man cannot be expected not even to stand up for his own good name."

"All that can be expected of any man, my dear fellow, is that he shall conscientiously try to act up to his lights. My lights are burning rather dimly at present, I must admit. You may well imagine this is a tremendous shock to me. I must have time to think."

"Will you not at least promise to let me know beforehand what you intend doing, if on a promise that I make no effort to sway you beyond the bare mention of any fact that I think might influence your action and may be unknown to you?"

"You legal serpent! And give you a chance to thwart me behind my back, if your affection prompted any such nefarious attempt. No, I will not."

"Very good. Then it is war to the knife between us. I will take my own way and tell you nothing, and we shall see who will win. No, I have nothing more to say," he continued, as the minister seemed inclined to speak. "War is declared. There is no further room for diplomatic procedure. I think, however, our enmity is not of such a nature as to prevent us shaking hands upon it. Good night, Hepburn."

"Good night, and God bless you," was the response, and with a hearty grasp of hands they parted.

Mr. Laing went straight to the Tweedies, looking and declaring himself better satisfied on the whole than he had been for some time.

"Hepburn is positively not quite sane," he said, "on the doctrine of self-sacrifice. A man with notions like these among all these villainous brutes and screaming jays."

"My dear Mr. Laing," interrupted Mrs. Tweedie in a tone of remonstrance.

"My dear Mrs. Tweedie, I beg your pardon; but one must open the safety valve some times."

"Pray, remember that a supporter who loses his temper is a very broken reed, to say nothing stronger."

"Humph! I believe you are right. I will let off the steam in future only in my own room with the door locked. However, our course now is clear. He must not be allowed to risk ruining himself in this reckless way. We must leave no means untried to gain some light upon the actual circumstances of the girl's end. I will see Blackwood to-morrow."

"He at least will leave no stone unturned to aid Mr. Hepburn," said Mrs. Tweedie. "God speed your errand."

CHAPTER XXI.

A LAST CHANCE.

THAT errand all the same required caution. Mr. Laing was known to be one of the minister's most intimate friends, and not to be in the habit of visiting the Blackwoods, two facts which rashness on his part might cause to emphasize themselves somewhat strongly in uneasy consciences, if there were such. He therefore resolved to content himself with merely leaving a message at the Blackwoods' door, to the effect that he wished particularly to see Robert, and wanted him to call that evening without fail. To his no small astonishment his knock was answered by Robert himself.

"The very man I wanted," he said. "I don't want to stop now, but I want to speak to you about a matter of great importance. Can you come and see me this evening?"

"Yes, sir. I've naething to stap me the night. What time will I be for to call?"

"About nine."

"I'll be there, sir."

Mr. Laing carefully made his way through various back streets to the higher parts of the town again, and was leisurely strolling along one of the principal streets when he met Mr. Lorrimer.

"Ah, Laing, well met," he said. "I wanted to speak to you. My dear fellow, you should really take some steps about your minister; about this scandal, I mean."

"Blow up a trumpet in the new moon and spread it far and wide?"

"Of course not. But take counsel among yourselves what is the best thing to do. The scandal really is spreading. My wife tells me in every house she goes to she hears it discussed. Probably we, being outsiders, hear more than you do ; and really, you know, the facts are awkward."

"Well, but we can't unmake the facts by talking about them."

"Oh, if you are determined to do nothing ! But I do assure you I think the matter is growing more serious than you suppose."

"No, I think I estimate it at its true value. But I will look up the law on slander when I go home. We may chance to need it. You had better give Mrs. Lorrimer a hint. It is precious easier to get drawn into a case of that sort than to get safe out of it again."

This little incident made it still clearer, however, to Mr. Laing that the time for action was come and that the case was serious ; more serious than enabled him to regard with equanimity the extremely slender character of the reed on which he leaned. If it was really the fact that the girl had been drowned accidentally without anyone seeing or hearing anything of it, then Robert Blackwood would be powerless, and it was impossible to see how any evidence, save the indirect evidence of personal character, could be brought forward, as against the really unfortunate circumstances of the case.

Punctually at nine o'clock Blackwood appeared, grave and taciturn as usual.

"I suppose you are rather surprised at my request ?" Mr. Laing said.

"Weel, sir, I canna just think what ye can want wi' me."

"I want you to do, or try to do, what I know you will

undertake with right good will—a very great service to Mr. Hepburn.”

“I’ll be glad to do that if it’s in my power. Mr. Hepburn’s aye been gude to me.”

“If you can do what I want, Blackwood, you’ll repay tenfold any kindness Mr. Hepburn can have done to you.”

“I’m no quite sure ye’re a judge, sir. But let me hear.”

Then Mr. Laing began his recital. He had in his mind the remembrance of his own and Mr. Hepburn’s first impression that Blackwood knew something more about the business than he choose to own, and he had purposely placed himself in a position to enable him to watch Blackwood’s face while he talked to him. He was foiled, however. He had not spoken many sentences when his listener suddenly moved in his chair, and bending forward, rested his elbow on his knee and covered his face with his hand. Mr. Laing involuntarily paused.

“Speak on, sir,” said Blackwood quietly, “I’m listenin’.”

And without movement or interruption of any sort, he remained seated in the position he had assumed, until Mr. Laing had finished his account.

“It’s the strangest piece o’ wark ever I chanced upon,” he then remarked, without changing his attitude.

“There is one thing, Blackwood, I would give a good deal to know, and that is whether you think the poor girl’s death was an accident?”

Blackwood raised his head and looked full at him.

“Why wad ye want to ken that, sir?”

“Because I confess both Mr. Hepburn and myself were struck with the impression, when we first saw you and told you she was missing, that you had some knowledge or suspicion on the subject.”

"Weel, sir, yer question's ane I'm no just prepared to answer. I canna but see its no a very likely thing for Mary to fall into the water that gait. But there seems nae evidence the ither way."

Mr. Laing's heart sank a little. The man's manner was more cold and indifferent than he had expected, when a question so important to Mr. Hepburn was under discussion. A sort of dread came over him as to whether he might possibly have made a fatal mistake. Could it be that Blackwood's easily aroused jealousy had been kindled respecting the minister himself, and that he shared the suspicion which was so fatally difficult to dissipate?

"Well, I confess I am disappointed to hear that, Blackwood," he said with a sigh, "for I had a hope you had some sort of suspicion, the following up of which might tend to clear up the mystery. I suppose, then, there is not much chance of your being able to do anything?"

"I canna tell till I try, sir. Ye've ta'en me by surprise. I've been a guid bit awa this some time, an' I've nae heard what was to the fore. I maun think it ower a bit."

"I wish you would let me know the result of your thinking," Mr. Laing said anxiously. "You know we lawyers get a good deal of practice that is useful in cases of this sort. If you chance upon any clue, I might be able to help you as to the best way of working it."

"Na, sir, if I work, I maun work my ain gait. I'll bear in mind what ye've tauld me, and if I can see my way to bein' o' ony use, I'll no be behind hand. An' now, I'll be goin', if there's naethin' mair ye want wi' me."

"No. I think that is all."

"Gude nicht, then, sir."

"Good night," Mr. Laing replied, and in another moment he was alone.

Alone, and most thoroughly disappointed and cast down. His last weapon seemed to have shivered in his hands. The minister impracticable, and Blackwood apparently coldly indifferent, and if he spoke honestly, without a thread of clue to follow. Look where he would there seemed to him to be no reasonable ground for hope of such a thorough clearance of the mystery as would alone be of essential service to Mr. Hepburn.

He had not even the courage to go and see him. He felt so miserably helpless. There was a large party in the congregation who would, he knew, loyally stand by the minister, if he would sanction any action. But what could anyone do so long as he stood determinedly aloof, apparently resolved to fight his own battle single handed, if in truth he had any intention of fighting at all?

Thus several days passed, and then one day Mr. Laing received a note from Mr. Hepburn, merely informing him of the minister's wish to meet the elders and deacons, together with a few leading members of the congregation, on the evening of that day week, at the usual meeting place of the kirk-session—a large room built for the special purpose adjoining the vestry.

"What can he mean to do?" Mr. Laing said to Dr. Tweedie, who had, he found, received a similar summons; he being one of the leading members, but neither an elder nor a deacon.

Dr. Tweedie could throw no light upon that point. He had seen Mr. Hepburn the previous day, but he had made no allusion to the subject.

"Do, both of you, go round to the manse this evening," Mrs. Tweedie said, "and try what you can do with him. It really is not right thus to keep all his friends at a distance. He must see, if you put it before him, that he is

strengthening the case against himself by acting thus. It has all the appearance of his friends holding aloof from him, because they have some misgivings."

"Well, if Tweedie will go, I will," said Mr. Laing; and then they fell to excogitating the most telling reasons they could adduce.

A fruitless labour! Within half an hour after they left Dr. Tweedie's house, they were back in the drawing-room again.

"What, would he not see you?" exclaimed Mrs. Tweedie in blank dismay.

"He's gone away."

"Gone? Where?"

"Mrs. Findlay doesn't know. To some friend's house she thinks. A stranger is to take the duty on Sunday, and 'e will be back the day before the meeting."

There was much excitement, and a multitude of varied rumours after that unexpected appearance of a stranger in the pulpit. Mr. Hepburn had gone to resign. The Presbytery had interfered, and forbidden his assuming any ministerial functions pending an inquiry into the scandal. There was even a rumour that he had been arrested. Mr. Laing could not resist hunting up Blackwood, to make sure he knew how urgent the matter had become.

"I don't think there can be any doubt," he said, "that Mr. Hepburn means to take some decisive steps at this meeting. If you are to do any good, Blackwood, it'll have to be before then."

"When will the meeting be, sir?"

Mr. Laing named day and hour. "For heaven's sake, Blackwood, tell me if you have any clue?"

"I canna say that I ken aught mair than I did when ye first spoke to me."

Mr. Laing made a gesture almost of despair. "I've a mind not to go to the meeting," he said. "If I have to go there, and see that oily scoundrel Cruickshanks smirking and triumphant, I'm certain I shall assault him."

To Mr. Laing's no small amazement Blackwood broke suddenly into a short, quick laugh.

"What on earth do you see to laugh at?" he asked sharply. Blackwood was grave again in a moment.

"No vera muckle, sir, indeed," he said. "It was just the thought o' Cruickshanks's face if ye did tackle him. I doubt he's no a vera valiant body. But I wadna haud aff the meetin', Mr. Laing. It's nae the time for friens to hang back, when a man's doun. Sic a meetin's not for the like o' me, but if I was a gentleman like yoursel' I'd no be awa frae the minister's side the noo."

"Well, Blackwood," said Mr. Laing, irritably, "I wish you would act on the principle of friends not hanging back. I cannot but think you might have done more than you have."

"Ye dinna just exactly ken what I have or havn't done, sir. I hope I'll be able to prove to ye ane o' these days that I hae dune my best. A man can do nae mair."

Nothing more did Mr. Laing or any one else see of Robert Blackwood, and even the hours of the dreaded day passed away without his making any sign. Mr. Laing, who was to dine with the Tweedies and accompany Dr. Tweedie to the meeting, stayed indoors the whole day, hoping every moment that some communication might reach him. But when he entered the Tweedie's house he had no cheering intelligence to impart.

It was but very little dinner that either of them touched, and Mrs. Tweedie made no pretence to dine at all. "Be sure and come straight home," she said to her husband as

they were preparing to start. "I shall not know a moment's peace until I hear what has happened."

Mr. Hepburn, it appeared, had summoned a good many of the congregation besides his office-bearers. The party when all assembled numbered about twenty. He, it was understood, was alone in the vestry, and had given orders he should be to^l as soon as the whole party had assembled. Mr. Cruickshanks was there, moving about with an air of easy complacency and subdued triumph, markedly at variance with the demeanour of the majority.

"Heaven send we get to business soon," Mr. Laing muttered to Dr. Tweedie. "The sight of that brute will be too much for me if we don't."

At last Mr. Hepburn came in, pale and grave, but perfectly self-possessed. He greeted the assembled party with slightly distant courtesy, only saying, "Shall we take our seats?" and almost intuitively they all fell into the places they were wont to fill on ordinary occasions when meetings of the sort were held. The minister was at the head of the table, with the door at his right hand in the extreme corner of the wall behind him. Mr. Laing and Dr. Tweedie were a short distance from him on his right hand and Mr. Cruickshanks was at his left hand, nearly opposite to them. After a moment's silence Mr. Hepburn rose and spoke.

"I have asked you to meet me here to-night, gentlemen, in consequence of my becoming aware quite lately of certain suspicions under which I lie."

"Not suspicions," interrupted Mr. Watson. "It doesn't come to that."

"We need not be so very particular about terms, though I believe the word I used would rightly express the attitude of a part at least of the congregation. What I wish in the first place to find out is whether the kirk-session has taken any action in this matter."

"No, certainly not," responded several voices, and Mr. Laing added defiantly, "and doesn't mean to do so either."

"Excuse me, Mr. Laing," interposed the suave tones of Mr. Cruickshanks, "but I think there you are speaking as an individual member."

"I am speaking, sir, as a member who has no special reason to suppose our kirk-session is composed of either knaves or fools."

"Be quiet, Laing," whispered Dr. Tweedie; "you'll only do mischief."

"We should, of course, all regret falling so low as that in Mr. Laing's opinion," replied Mr. Cruickshanks softly: "but still there may be differences of opinion on the main point. If Mr. Hepburn will allow me, I should like to ask him a question."

"Ask it," said the minister shortly.

"Well, sir, under the very painful circumstances which have arisen, I am sure, to the very deep regret of all of us, I would venture to ask whether it has not occurred to you that perhaps the most satisfactory and least distressing course for you, and for us all, would be for you to resign?"

"No, sir. Such a step has not occurred to me as a satisfactory course at all."

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed Mr. Laing.

"Then, sir," continued Mr. Cruickshanks, "I am forced to say what I had hoped to find might be unnecessary, and that is, that, painful and distressing as it will be to me to take such a step. I shall feel it an imperative duty to move that the matter be taken into consideration by the kirk-session, with a view to the removal of a grave scandal, most injurious to the welfare of the congregation."

"You infernal blackguard," muttered Mr. Laing under his breath; and once more Dr. Tweedie interposed.

“I am glad you have stated your intentions so clearly, Mr. Cruickshanks,” replied the minister; “it clears the road for what I have to say. I have convened the present meeting because I wish not merely the kirk-session, whom it principally concerns, but all the office-bearers, and the leading members of the congregation, should know exactly what I intend. The only question to be considered in this matter is, what is the best for the credit of the church, and the welfare of this particular congregation. This I hold to be a point which neither the congregation nor myself are competent to decide. My own opinion would be of course valueless, and I know that it would be vain to expect unanimity of sentiment in the congregation. There are, I know, some members of it who would rejoice to see me condemned”—and he shot a scathing glance at Mr. Cruickshanks—“there are many, on the other hand, whose personal friendliness towards me would render them partial judges. My intention, therefore, is to request the Presbytery to take action in this matter. To pronounce in the first instance, whether or not they hold the facts to constitute any evidence against me; and then, quite irrespective of their decision on that point, or of any question of justice to myself, to decide, solely and simply with a view to the interests of the congregation and church at large, whether they judge it best that I shall continue to hold my place here or resign. I shall be glad to know whether the kirk-session hold this action on my part sufficient to render any official action unnecessary?”

Before anyone else had time to speak, Mr. Cruickshanks again broke in.

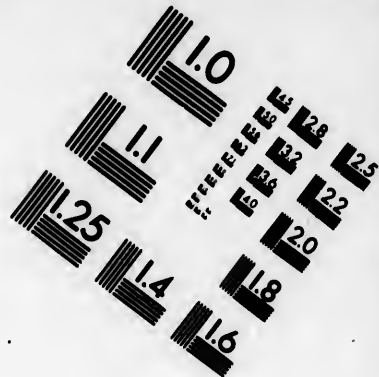
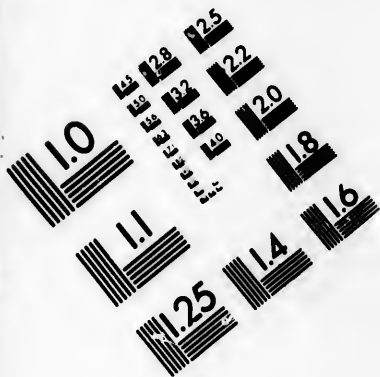
“Again, Mr. Hepburn, I would venture to urge upon you the numerous advantages to be gained by your resignation, without any further painful discussion.”

“And again, Mr. Cruickshanks,” the minister began, in a

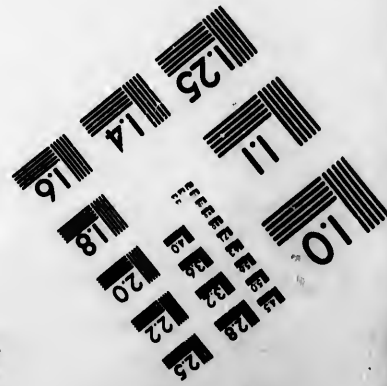
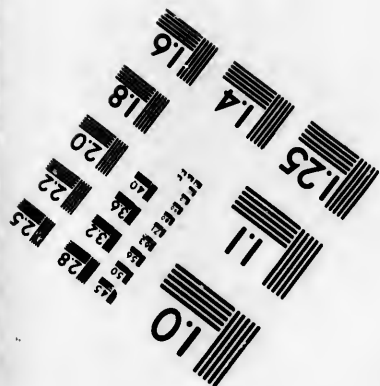
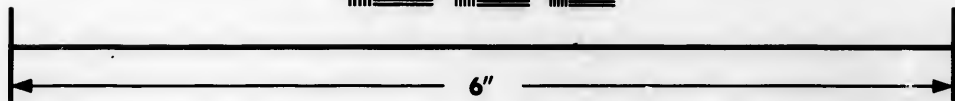
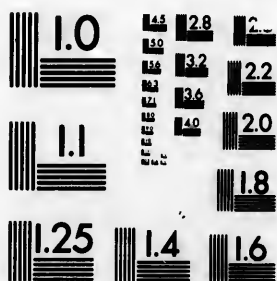
tone of suppressed vehemence. But there he paused abruptly. Mr. Cruickshanks had turned almost livid, and was actually cowering, with a terror-stricken gaze intently fixed upon the door. Mr. Hepburn glanced hastily over his shoulder. The door had been softly opened, and in the doorway was standing Robert Blackwood.

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CHAPTER XXII.

A THUNDERBOLT.

THERE was a pause of breathless amazement. The minister's pale face grew still paler, and he caught his breath with a sort of gasp. A flash of triumph crossed Mr. Laing's face, but passed in a moment into a look of puzzled anxiety, as he glanced at Mr. Hepburn. Blackwood stood eyeing the assembly with perfect composure. There was no scowl, rather an expression of resolute determination on his pale face, and there was a dangerous glitter in his dark eyes.

"I'm sorry to disturb ye, gentlemen," he said, "but I've a word to say to ye."

"I protest against this unseemly interruption," exclaimed Mr. Cruickshanks, in a hoarse, trembling voice, starting up from his seat. "I move that this unwarranted intruder be at once turned out."

"It wad tak' the whole lot o' ye a' yer time to manage that," replied Blackwood quietly.

"Is this to be allowed?" said Mr. Cruickshanks, with growing agitation. "I call it monstrous. If the meeting chooses to submit to such an insult, I shall at once retire."

The meeting did not seem inclined immediately to reply. In the first place, it was very much astonished; in the second, Mr. Cruickshanks's almost frantic agitation rather excited its curiosity to see what this unusual incident was to lead to.

Mr. Cruickshanks paused for a moment, tightly clutching the back of his chair with a trembling hand. Then, seeing that no one seemed inclined to second his protest, he made

for the door. Before he reached it, however, he came to an abrupt halt. That part of the doorway which was not filled by Blackwood himself was occupied by a large, and, to say the least of it, exceedingly grave looking mastiff. Blackwood smiled grimly.

"I doubted that would be your little game, man, sae no being sure I'd find a key, I've just brocht my ain. Ye can stand where ye are, or gang back to yer seat, but ye dinna leave this room till I've had my say."

With that he advanced into the room and closed the door. "Lie doon, Jock," he said, and the dog deliberately stretched himself across the doorway.

"That'll do. Now, gentlemen, I've no wish to be ony-way uncivil; but I've that to say I mean ye sall all hear, an' I wadna just advise ye to try an' open that door till I call the dog off. Ye'se best sit doon, Mr. Cruickshanks."

Mr. Cruickshanks mechanically obeyed, drawing out a handkerchief as he did so to wipe away the drops thickly clustering on his clammy forehead. The rest of the assembly sat in mute amazement. Only Mr. Laing was watching Blackwood with intense interest. Blackwood caught his eye, as he came slowly forward, and stood beside the minister.

"Ye'll hae to admit I've done my best, sir," he said, with a faint smile.

Mr. Hepburn was still trembling visibly. "Blackwood," he said in a tone almost of entreaty.

"Haud yer peace, minister. Time enouch for ye to speak when I've had my say. An' so, gentlemen, ye're no content, are ye, wi' lettin' yer screechin jays o' wives rin up and doun the toun, blackin' the character o' the only man in the place worth a thocht, but ye maun gang an mak' a serious business o't. Eh, but ye're a set o' fause-hearted loons! Could ye nae tell a gude man better than that when ye see."

him? Why, the maist glakit lassie in the kingdom wad be safe eneuch wi' the minister, an' that's mair than I'd say for the maist o' ye, I'll tell ye, married men though ye maistly are. But syne ye've grown sae desperate virtuous, I've come the noo to set yer minds at rest. 'Deed, an' it maun be maist distressin' to a set o' godly elders and deacons to think there's sic a like scandal hangin' ower the kirk. But ye shall gang hame an' sleep in peace the nicht—the maist o' ye, that's to say," and he shot a scathing glance at the pallid Cruickshanks. "It was just I myself that threw the lassie into the water; an' the minister kens nae mair about it than ony bairn in the cradle."

Mr. Hepburn sank down in his chair, with a sound between a groan and a sob, and buried his white face in his arms on the table. Blackwood laid his hand almost caressingly on his shoulder, and said in a low voice, and with a strangely softened countenance—

"Haud up like a man, sir." Then he glanced round the table, and with his flashing glance spoke again—

"I'm no gaun to tell ye ony mair about it. Ye'll hear in gude time. But that's just the truth; sae ye can just gang hame and pit the stapper on yer wives' bletcherin' tongues—not that they're at the bottom o't. They've only been the tools o' a clever rascal," and his eyes seemed to blaze as again his glance fell on Mr. Cruickshanks's shrinking form. "Ah, ye accursed scoundrel, yer time's come."

"Blackwood, Blackwood, I implore you," interrupted the minister, starting up.

"Na, na, sir. I told ye what I would do if he tried to do ye ony ill turns, an' its just for that I waited for this evenin'. Eh, ye're a nice set to be elders o' the kirk, the maist o' ye spendin' a yer week-days makin' money as hard as ye can, an' playin' the saint on Sabbath days. But yon's

the flower o' ye a'. Ye lying hypocrite, trying to drive oot the minister for fear he wad learn frae me some o' yer evil doin's. How many times hae I brocht up packages o' smuggled goods for ye frae the shore in the dead o' the nicht, an' the yard a' laid wi' straw, so as the wheels an' hoofs wad mak' nae sound; an' a' the goods handed in in the dark, for fear a light should betray ye; an' ye there in yer saft slippers, to mak' nae noise. Ye might weel undersell respectable dealers that paid honest duty on their tea and brandy, an' a' the rest o't, an' pit a heavier profit in yer pocket forbye. An' hoo many pounds hae ye paid me at a time, a' in gold and silver, lest the very notes wad betray ye. Ye've digged a pit an' fa'en in't yersel this time, man. I'd ne'er hae betrayed ye if ye'd let the minister alane. Noo, gentlemen, I've had my say, sae I'll relieve ye o' my presence. It maun be maist painfu' for sic a lot o' respectable gentlemen to find themselves in the company o' a murderer."

For all his answer Mr. Laing sprang up, and seizing Blackwood's hand wrung it heartily. He could not trust himself to speak.

"Where are you going, Blackwood?" asked Mr. Hepburn.

"Goin', sir? Why, to the police station, to gie mysel' up."

"My God!" exclaimed the minister in agony, "must it come to that?"

"Yes, sir. There's nae twa ways aboot that. Dinna ye fash yersel', sir. I haud it but a licht thing to do for ye."

"You shall not go alone, at anyrate. Go and wait a short time in the vestry, till the business here is settled, and then I will go with you myself. I may be able to make things better for you."

"Thank you, sir. It's ower gude o' ye. I'll be greatly helped by havin' ye wi' me."

Blackwood and his dog retired to the vestry, and there was immediately a great rising up and crowding round the minister, to shake his hand. In the midst of this confusion Mr. Cruickshanks got up, with the intention of apparently leaving the room. But Mr. Hepburn's eye was on him.

"One moment, Mr. Cruickshanks," he said, gently. "Before you leave, I have something to say which it is important you should hear. Gentlemen, please resume your seats."

They all obeyed. But it was not without a great effort that the minister could control himself sufficiently to speak with even moderate steadiness.

"You will pardon me, gentlemen," he said, "if my words are abrupt and ill-chosen. You will understand what a shock I have received, and how strangely mingled my feelings are. I know there are some among you who have never doubted me. Them I thank most heartily for their loyal confidence. To others, who have had doubts, I can only say, that looking at all the circumstances I cannot blame them. But all of you will now fully understand how cruelly I have suffered since our last meeting in this room. I pray God none of you may ever experience the mental agony I have gone through. And now I am going to ask a very great favour of you. From those who have doubted, I ask it as a reparation for suspicions which they know now to have been unjust. From those who never doubted, I ask it as some amend for all I have suffered, without, as far as I know, the least fault on my own part."

He paused, and Mr. Watson instantly spoke.

"I am sure, Mr. Hepburn, I may constitute myself spokesman for the whole party, and say that you have only to name your wish."

The minister stood silent for a moment, with his eyes cast

down. Then he suddenly fixed them full on Mr. Cruickshanks. But there was none of its scathing quality in his glance. It was mild and sad.

"Mr. Cruickshanks," he said, "it is not for man to judge you. God is my witness, I bear you no ill-will. I would willingly have averted from you if I could, what I feared was coming, the moment Robert Blackwood entered; for I knew he had determined, after your first attack upon me, to be revenged upon you if you endeavoured further to injure me. Fortunately Blackwood's accusations against you are no necessary part of the poor fellow's only too terribly complete vindication of myself. The favour I would claim from the other gentlemen present is their most solemn promise, on their faith as Christian men, and on their honour as gentlemen, that not one syllable of what has transpired this night, in this respect shall ever pass their lips; on condition that you, assigning any such reason as you prefer, at once retire from the eldership, and that the shop in Porter's Wynd be closed as soon as possible. Do you accept these conditions?"

Mr. Cruickshanks rose from his seat, and clutching the table hard, replied in a voice he vainly strove to steady—

"I altogether protest against a most monstrous proceeding. I appeal to the gentlemen present. My character has never been impeached. Is the word of a confessed murderer to be held as sufficient evidence to raise even a suspicion against me? I should have thought, Mr. Hepburn, after your own experience, you would not have been so ready to accept unverified statements."

A low mutter passed round the table.

"One moment," said Mr. Hepburn, and hastily writing on a slip of paper "Can you not see very little will make them refuse to promise?" he passed it to Mr. Cruickshanks. Then, after a moment's pause, he spoke.

"If you refuse, Mr. Cruickshanks, considering that it will probably be impossible for us after to-night, to secure Robert Blackwood's attendance, my only course will, I think, be at once to form a meeting of the kirk-session, every member of which I see present here, and interrogate him further respecting his statements."

This suggestion elicited a very unmistakable murmur of approval. Still Mr. Cruickshanks sat silent, rage and mortification struggling hard with a very distinct perception of the inevitable.

"We wait your decision, Mr. Cruickshanks," said Mr. Hepburn. "And I must remind you that the matter is urgent. For me, at least, much painful business is still waiting. Do you accept the conditions?"

"Yes." The tone was surly and sullen.

"Then, gentlemen, your promise."

"Be hanged but I'd have stood out had I known what you were driving at," said Mr. Laing bitterly.

"Hush, Laing," Mr. Hepburn said sternly. "Don't regret being held back from evil doing."

The promise was solemnly given all round.

"Now, Mr. Cruickshanks," said the minister, "your future is in your own hands. May God give you grace to judge yourself justly, and to guide your life henceforth according to that judgment. I daresay you will now prefer to retire."

Without a word Mr. Cruickshanks took up his hat and left the room.

Then Mr. Watson started up. "Mr. Hepburn," he said, "before all the gentlemen present I wish to confess that I have felt some doubts on this painful subject, and most sincerely to crave your forgiveness for having wronged you in thought."

Two or three more started up, but Mr. Hepburn raised both hands deprecatingly.

"For God's sake, gentlemen," he said, in an agitated tone, no more, I beseech you. I cannot forgive, where I cannot allow forgiveness is required. May the blessing of God rest upon you all. And now I would ask you to leave me. I have to think of the poor fellow who has sacrificed himself irretrievably for me."

"Go and wait for me at the Tweedies, Laing," he said, as the rest streamed out. "I want to have a little talk with Blackwood. But you had better go with us to the police station. We will call for you in passing."

In the vestry Mr. Hepburn found Blackwood quietly waiting, sitting with his elbows resting on his knees, and twirling a light cane in his fingers. The minister advanced, and laid both hands on his head.

"My boy, my boy," he said; "was there no way but this?"

"No sir, nane. An' dinna ye tak on. I'll die like a man if they hang me, an' bless you wi' my last breath."

"It will not come to that. But, oh! Blackwood, how came you to this?"

"It wasna dune wi' deliberate intent. But sit ye dune, sir. I wad fain tell ye a' aboot it quietly, by coorsels."

Mr. Hepburn took a chair, and Blackwood began—

"I met her in the toun, sir, the vera day it happened, early in the mornin' gettin' some things for her aunt; an' I spoke to her again aboot oor gettin' married. She was just in ane o' her flighty moods, an wad do naethin' but laugh an' taunt me. She didna ken if she wad ever get married ava; an' she was ower young; an' she didna like dour faces. An' then, at last, she said she was gaein oot that afternoon, an' maybe she'd meet a laddie she fancied mair than me; but

if naethin' cam o't maybe she'd think aboot me. An wi that she joukit roun' the corner, an' was aff. I didna set muckle faith upon that aboot her meetin' onyboody, for I didna think the man I ken't she wad mean was aboot just at that moment. But she'd angered me sair, an' I thoct I'd best get mysel' awa, sae I took the cairt an' went ower to the farm, just as ye ken. An' I did start for the shepherd's house, sure eneuch; but I hadna gane vera far before I caught sicht o' a man walkin' across the hills in the direction o' the Strathellon woods that lookit gey like the man I had a fear on. I had a grand wee glass in my pocket, an' I had a gude look. I was sure it was him, then, by the height and build, for I couldna see his face at that distance. Then the thoct struck me he was awa' tae the river side, an' that likely it wad be true Mary was for meetin' him there. It drove me fair mad, an' I set oot after him. I lost sicht o' him, an' I peered about the woods a lang while, an' at last I caught a glint o' him through the brushwood. I meant to do for him if I got the chance, an' I fired, but the pistol missed fire, an' he heard it, and made a dash through the bushes. Then I set aff at speed, and eh, but I gied some one a fricht, I doubt. I dinna ken wha it might be, for I kept my face weel turned awa' for fear he wad ken me; but I knocked some one ower into the bushes as I ran doun the path. I was makin' for the road, to gang back to the farm as quick as might be, an' then I cam' all of a sudden on Mary. I'd nae doubt then what was in the wind, an' a sort o' whirlin' an' rushin' cam' on in my heid. I ken I just caught her up, like a bairn, an' flung her far into the river, an' I ken nae mair distinctly, what happened. I got back to the farm some way, an' came hame the next day. I've been expectin' ever since, that whoever it was I tummelled ower in the wood wad be to the fore to tell aboot it. But I

doubt it maun hae been a poacher, an' sae he's nae mind to say a word."

"And this is the man you wanted to kill before?"

"Ay, sir, ye're richt eneuch there; an' if they dinna hang me noo, I'll hae his life yet. I've puir Mary's death tae revenge on him, the noo."

The minister wisely held his peace, and refrained from delivering a faithful message. Blackwood's ignorance as to who it was he had unintentionally assaulted removed the only dread he had in his mind as to the possible result of his confession; and nothing he felt, could be better than that the poor fellow should be allowed to tell his own tale. Nothing could more thoroughly show how wholly unpremeditated the murder of the girl had been. One thing only was clear. For Lady Ellinor Farquharson's sake, as well as Blackwood's own, all mention of the pistol shot must be suppressed.

"Everything that can be done shall be done for you, Blackwood," he said. "But one thing is clear—you must say noching about the attempt to shoot."

"How not, sir?"

"It will make the case stronger against you—that you should have had deliberate murder in your mind. Admit that you supposed Mary intended to meet a rival, and came back to watch what went on; that you met her unexpectedly, and your action was the result of a burst of ungovernable anger."

"Weel, sir, I'll do just as ye think best. I hae cleared ye althegither, and I dinna care for aught else. But eh, minister, there's something gey queer about it all. The first time I tried I a' but murdered ye; and the second time I've gane near to ruin yer gude name."

"Let there never be a third time, my lad. Maybe my life will pay for it then, and I think that would cost you a sore heart."

“Eh, man, dinna speak o’ sic a thing I think I wad blow my ain brains oot if sic a thing happened. But ye’ll no be troubled wi’ me or my doin’s this mony a day the noo, even if they don’t hang me,” he added, with a melancholy smile, “Maybe ye’ll be far awa’ frae Mossgiel ere I see it again. We’ll gang the noo, if ye dinna mind, sir. The sooner its ower the better pleased I’ll be.”

“But where’s the dog?” said Mr. Hepburn, as they passed out of the building.

“Awa’ hame. I tauld him to gang, Puir beast, he’d no hae gaen had he kent he’d likely ne’er see his master again. Dogs are better aff, some ways, than men. They haven’t any religious duty to think o’ that forces them to turn their back on their friends when they get into trouble. I’m thinkin’ sir, ye’ve somethin’ o’ the dog about ye. Ye’re gey slow to turn yer back on one. Ye’ll gang the morrow an’ see my sister Maggie, will ye no, sir? She kens naught yet. Nane o’ them ken but my brither Adam; an’ he’s to tell them the nicht. Puir Maggie ’ll be fair daft. She an’ I were aye gude friens.”

Mr. Hepburn gave the promise, and in mournful silence they walked together towards the police station. Mr. Laing and Dr. Tweedie were both in waiting for them at the door of Dr. Tweedie’s house; and with heavy hearts the little group passed on towards their destination.

Firmly, quietly, and composedly, Robert Blackwood told his tale to the puzzled sergeant, who naturally could find, in all his experience, no precedent for a man coming to give himself up on a charge of murder, escorted, with evident regard and consideration, by a minister and two other highly respected inhabitants of the town. He seemed to hesitate about entering the charge, and looked doubtingly towards Dr. Tweedie, as though the idea had occurred to him that his

presence on the occasion indicated, possibly, some suspicion on his part of hallucination.

"I fear you must accept it," Dr. Tweedie said, answering the look. "I daresay you have heard the scandal which some mischievous tongues have set going. When I tell you that Robert Blackwood gives himself up solely to clear Mr. Hepburn, I am sure we need not ask you to do everything you can, consistently with your duty, to make his position as little painful as possible."

The sergeant made no reply, but proceeded to write out the charge, not however, without more than once passing his hand across his eyes, "You must come away with me now, Rob, my lad," he said, when he had finished: "but it's the cruellest piece of work that ever fell to my lot."

Then, had Mossgiel but known it, the appalling spectacle was presented of three of its leading inhabitants taking a cordial affectionate farewell of a murderer. None of the three as they turned away noted what the sergeant did—the wistful tenderness of the glance which Blackwood fixed upon the minister, until the door closed after the retreating group.

Slowly and sadly they retraced their steps to Dr. Tweedie's house, where Mrs. Tweedie only congratulated Mr. Hepburn by a silent pressure of the hand. It was too dearly bought a clearance, for words of rejoicing. Who could tell whether it might not yet prove that the man on whom rested the guilt of murder had sacrificed his own life to clear the reputation of another man?

Then Mr. Hepburn told them so much of Blackwood's history as he chose. "Is it possible a death sentence can result?" he asked, the words seeming almost to choke him.

"I don't think it under all the circumstances," said Mr. Laing. "The very way in which he has given himself up,

when he had not the slightest reason to fear suspicion falling upon him, must tell in his favour. Then there is the family history. Epilepsy on one side, habitual drunkenness on the other. Tweedie, you must work that up to the utmost of your ability. We must leave no stone unturned to place in counsel's hands every possible line of defence."

"If you want the family history," put in Mrs. Tweedie, "you must go to the union. There's an old Mrs. Lennox there, who is some relation of theirs. She began talking to me about them one day, a long while since, when I went to see an old woman. I am certain either a grandfather or grandmother, but on which side I forget, committed suicide. I did not pay much attention at the time."

Mr. Hepburn very soon withdrew, "He is terribly shaken," Mrs. Tweedie said, as soon as Dr. Tweedie re-entered the drawing room.

"My dear madam," exclaimed Mr. Laing, "who wouldn't be shaken? But for very shame I could have sobbed like a child, to hear that poor fellow denouncing himself, to clear the character of the man he loves. I should think never in this world did man go through more violent revulsions of feeling than Hepburn did in the course of our meeting to-night."

"And now, perhaps, your prophecy about him will begin to be fulfilled."

"I don't know about that just yet. Blackwood expressed his opinions with more candour than politeness. Eh, Tweedie? You could smile complacently, but some of our friends will have, I suspect, too sore recollections in connection with the minister's vindication to let them be quite just towards him for a time. You may depend upon it it is an uncommonly hard thing to be perfectly just towards anyone irrevocably associated in your mind with a most mortifying hu-

miliation. I suspect some people will have found their husbands uncommonly sulky by this time."

"Only love can save." These words seemed to be ringing in James Hepburn's ears again, as he walked homewards. It was a strange and new reading of the axiom which had burst with startling force upon him that night. From what had not the love he had himself aroused saved him? There had been dark hours, terrible wrestlings for him, during that past week, when it had seemed to him as though his own efforts to act up to the high teaching of these simple words had resulted chiefly in casting a stain upon himself which he could never hope entirely to wipe out; and which must be ever a shadow upon his own power for good; a discredit to the church. And now all that dark cloud of evil was swept away in a moment, and the motive force which had brought that result about sprang from an action on his own part which he certainly held to be merely the outcome of a natural entitlement of common humanity!

It seemed to him altogether bewildering—not unnaturally. A man may contrive, by a mental effort, to get outside himself, and contemplate his own actions as those of some imaginary person, but he takes with him his own imaginative faculties. He can never get inside other people, and use their faculties. Principles are plants bearing fruit, the flavour of which greatly depends on the soil in which they are grown. When the true well spring of all Christian life and action has overflowed every part of a man's nature, his commonest actions have a flavour not always perceptible in the actions of the loudest professors of religious fervour. Lacking the power to bring the contemplative faculties of other people to bear on his own doings, James Hepburn often found himself subject to bewildering discoveries of results he had a difficulty in tracing to their true causes.

CHAPTER · XXIII.

A TANGLED SKEIN.

MR. LAING'S philosophy, if somewhat cynical, was at least founded on long experience of such phases of human nature as made themselves most frequently apparent in Mossgiel. Results are apt at times to throw a somewhat exasperating illumination backwards. In the light of the startling occurrences of that evening, which had so suddenly dried up the broad stream of scandal that had seemed to threaten seriously the well-being of the Free Church in Mossgiel, that small rivulet of chatter and gossip from which it had taken its rise seemed a very evil thing—a thing to be so much ashamed of, that the question naturally presented itself, why had not its flow been promptly checked before it had a chance of assuming such mischievous proportion—Ah, why? Why did not Ahab keep Jezebel in better order? Why did not Samson promptly repress Delilah's thirst for information? The unexpressed consciousness of these facts, to which Robert Blackwood had given such unpleasant prominence, would have been mortifying enough. To remember the extreme distinctness with which they had been stated in the presence of the very man who had suffered from them most cruelly, was something more than mortifying.

In the first moments of a really generous reaction of feeling this had been forgotten; but meditation at leisure could not fail to give rise to reflections of a decidedly stinging character, and human nature being what it is, it could hardly be expected that a man intimately, if innocently,

associated with those reflections should bound into sudden popularity.

The outspoken chatter whereby women spread a scandalous story is the noisy rivulet which swells into a torrent ; the quiet innuendoes, or epigrammatic remarks, pointed by an emphasis or intonation, by means of which men accomplish the same result, are the noiseless ground springs which swell the torrent unobserved. Hence it is always easy to lay the whole responsibility for the torrent on the rivulet, and it is to be feared that much ungenerous use of this fact was made at this time in Mossiel ; and that upon many wives it was impressed with a great assumption of righteous marital displeasure, that they had not only done "a devil of a lot of mischief," but exposed those liege lords to whom their respect was due, to most unmerited humiliation and annoyance.

Certainly there was something adrift. "Mr. Campbell, of course, will not be at the meeting," Mrs. Campbell had said to Mrs. Watson. "You must be sure and come and tell me, the next day, what passes." And a little social gathering in Mrs. Campbell's drawing-room had been a sort of understood thing. But "a pressing engagement" prevented Mrs. Watson from appearing, and very few of the other guests presented themselves, save Mrs. Haigg and Miss Muir, who, being exempt from all fear of the lash, rallied gallantly.

"To my thinking," said Mrs. Haigg, "it is a most doubtful story altogether. If Mr. Hepburn was so wholly free from all blame, why should he have seemed so downcast from the first moment the girl was drowned?"

"But my dear Mrs. Haigg, you cannot suppose Robert Blackwood accused himself falsely, just to save Mr. Hepburn?"

"I don't suppose anything of the sort; and I don't suppose he confessed of his own free will either. My conviction is that Mr. Hepburn knew something about it all the time; was, in truth, accessory after the fact, and that finding suspicion was excited, he made Blackwood confess, pointing out to him, probably, that by so doing he would be more likely to get off being hung than if Mr. Hepburn was obliged to turn Queen's evidence to shield himself. That Mr. Hepburn should have got himself suspected in this way is just the natural result of failing to do the right from the very first. No human being has a right to condone a murder. For my part, I can only say I hope Mr. Hepburn will take well to heart the lesson he has had."

"I think you are quite right," put in Miss Muir. "That is just the view I take myself, and it is just what I suggested this morning to Mr. Cruickshanks, when I was talking over the matter with him. He did not say much, but he shook his head and gave a sort of shrug of his shoulders. He is such a good-natured man, I have no doubt he did not like to say as much, but I feel quite sure he agreed with me. Of course we must all feel very glad Mr. Hepburn is so far cleared; but I must confess, I, for one, cannot but believe, still, that he was gravely to blame."

This was far too consolatory a view of the subject not to spread rapidly, and Mr. Cruickshanks was almost disposed to hold that inspiration had descended upon Miss Muir. The blow which had fallen on himself had been too crushing to let him, at the first moment, gather himself together again. But he was not so much shattered, as not at once to perceive the value of the weapon thus thrust into his hands. He very soon felt himself able to improve upon Miss Muir's position; and the assertion may be hazarded, in the case of a man habitually leading a double life, that

he probably soon succeeded in persuading himself that he really believed it was extremely likely that the minister, with some suspicion of the part he had played, had incited Blackwood's attack upon him, out of revenge ; and had subsequently acted out of cautious desire not to press that revenge too far. His spirits rose more rapidly than he could have believed possible when he left the meeting, crushed by a defeat as entire as it was unexpected.

He was therefore able to send in his resignation of the eldership with much equanimity of sentiment. He did not need, under the circumstances, to assign any reason publicly, and privately he was able to make good use, on the sure basis of his certainty that the promise made to the minister would be kept faithfully, of that peculiar deprecating gesture, partly shrug, partly an expressive motion of the hands, which was one of the most useful weapons in his armoury. No inconsiderable number of people left his shop, after expressing their regret at his retirement from official connection with the Free Church, convinced, though he had never said so, that he was far from satisfied with the results of the late meeting ; and that he felt the only course open to him was to retire, and, under existing circumstances, to leave the affairs of the church in the hands of those who felt differently from himself. "Existing circumstances" was a term he used extensively. It implied so much, and defined so little, that it suited the sentiments of every one equally well. It was as a large mass of admirable moulding clay, easily workable into any shape it was desirous it should assume.

This was the immediate result of the prompt action taken by the minister, in respect of Blackwood's sudden attack upon Mr. Cruickshanks. Verily the children of this world are wiser than the children of light *in their generation*. The

limitation is important ; but then the majority are also limited in spiritual vision—hence the wisdom is more apparent to them than the force of the limitation. Otherwise the saying would not have caused so much perplexity to many honest people as it has done.

Miss Muir did not neglect to strengthen her position by observing that Mr. Hepburn did not seem greatly cheered up by the wonderfully complete clearance of his character, of which they heard so much from his admirers ; that, in fact, he looked more depressed and downcast than before.

“You may depend,” she said, at a small gathering in her own house, “he is far from being at ease, and will be so until Blackwood’s trial is over. I’m told his family are going to engage first-rate counsel, and that they are sure they can make an *alibi* so almost certain that they are going to dispute the trustworthiness of his confession, and make out that the shock of the girl’s death has turned his brain, and that he has accused himself falsely in consequence—a thing which, you know, has happened not unfrequently. And I understand they can prove a good deal of insanity in the family, besides his mother’s case. So, after all, this wonderful clearance we have heard so much of may turn out to be less complete than it appears. At anyrate, if a strong defence is set up, and many witnesses are examined, it is very likely something may be dragged out of some of them which it would be convenient to keep back.”

“When does the trial come on ?” asked Mrs. Watson, who still eagerly sought information, although since the meeting her frame of mind had been much subdued, and she seemed no longer inclined to take any leading part in the discussions.

“Soon, I believe. I don’t understand these arrangements ;

but I think it will not be long. I am sure some one told me so."

The report of Blackwood's confession spread rapidly, and one of the first results was to bring Sir Maurice Adair in search of Mr. Hepburn.

"I heard the whole story at Danescourt last night," he said. "Mr. Laing was over seeing Mr. Chamberlayne about some business, and dined there. I never slept a wink the whole night."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the minister, in sudden panic. "I hope you held your tongue."

"Of course I did. But I have done nothing since but curse my own folly. I saw in a moment what a painful and awkward position I had involuntarily placed you in. I hope you will believe I bitterly regret it, Mr. Hepburn. You did not spare me," he added, colouring a little; "but I hope you will not doubt that I can thoroughly respect a minister who boldly and fearlessly does his duty."

"I do not care to discuss the matter with you, Sir Maurice. There is no harm done, as the case stands, seeing no other name than mine got mixed up in the matter."

"But about this man Blackwood. I conclude it was he who tried to shoot me?"

"To you I may admit it was. But be careful not to hint that fact to anyone. You can see that the fact of your being in the woods might, if it became known, involve consequences we could not control. Besides, you will well understand my anxiety, under all the circumstances, to get the poor fellow off as lightly as possible. The fact of his having tried to shoot you would tell heavily against him."

"Of course it would. You may depend on my silence. But what on earth could he want to shoot me for? I never spoke to the fellow in my life. I never even saw him to

know who he was. I suppose I saw him at the Strathellon ball ; but he was gone before Chamberlayne told us about his looks, and warned us of dancing with his sweetheart."

The minister looked at him thoroughly for a moment.

"You remember the girl?" he said.

"Perfectly."

"Can you remember ever having paid her any such attention as might have roused his jealousy?"

"Certainly not. Perhaps you will hardly give me credit for speaking truthfully, but it is true, nevertheless, that I always carefully avoid paying any marked attention to a pretty girl of that class. A deal of mischief comes of it, and at best it is very apt to be detrimental to a girl's character. Of course one is supposed to dance and flirt as much as possible at those sort of parties ; but I never single out any one girl for marked attention. I remember her at more than one servants' ball I have been at, but I certainly never paid her any greater attention than I paid to half-a-dozen others."

"Then I can only believe it a case of mistaken identity. He admitted that when he first saw you he judged of identity only from size and build ; and when he fired, I believe he merely recognized by your dress that it was the man he had been following."

"Been following," repeated Sir Maurice.

"Yes. Ah, but you do not know that part of the story. Laing of course could not tell you that." And then he told him the whole of Blackwood's account of himself.

Sir Maurice was much agitated.

"Good God!" he exclaimed ; "then I am really the cause of the poor girl's murder, as well as of all you have gone through. For Heaven's sake, Mr. Hepburn, use every effort to get him off. Let money be no object. I will find any amount that is wanted."

"You cannot think I need any inducement to do the utmost that can be done for him. But getting him off is out of the question. Penal servitude it must be ; but I think, and so does Laing, that will be the worst we need expect."

"Could we not plead that the shock of the girl's death had preyed on his mind, and turned his brain, and that he had falsely accused himself? It seems so easy, short of your evidence and mine, to almost prove he was far away."

"Yes, short of your evidence and mine. But you and I know that he was there, and know that he did the deed. There would be a sort of tacit perjury in our attempting to get such a defence set up."

"Is there nothing then I can do to undo the mischief I have done?"

"Nothing, Sir Maurice. It is a chance rarely given to us to undo the effects of our own evil actions."

He spoke almost sternly. It was hard perhaps for him to be even just towards the man whose one selfish action had wrought so much woe and suffering. Sir Maurice coloured.

"You are cold and hard, Mr. Hepburn," he said bitterly. "Do you not believe I am in earnest? or does it need that a man should commit a murder to soften your heart towards his wrong doings?"

"I had no intention of being cold and hard, Sir Maurice. But remember, you and Robert Blackwood can hardly be judged by the same rule; and remember this," he added, fixing a piercing look on the younger man, "Blackwood has voluntarily risked death at the hangman's hands to clear my character from all suspicion. Could I see you make plain your determination to gain a far more important end by a far less tremendous sacrifice, you should have no cause to deem me cold and hard."

"All power to do that is taken out of my hands for the present at least," Sir Maurice replied, in a low voice.

"Yes, thank God, it is. But you know, and I know, that you have made no such stern and firm resolve to crush an unlawful passion out of your heart as will render you safe from giving way to temptation should it arise; and that neither are you prepared, supposing you cannot do that, to take care and avoid the temptation. When I remember all that may possibly hang on your determination, I cannot feel for you, weakly trifling, as I do for that poor lad, who, for all his evil doings, and all his terrible heritage, has not hesitated to sacrifice the whole of his future life, at the very best, in order to atone to me for an unintentional wrong."

"We will not discuss the matter further, Mr. Hepburn. You neither know what I feel, nor what I intend. For Blackwood, at any rate, I will do the utmost I can. I will see him myself, and make him promise to apply to me, whenever he is free. I will make it my business to see that he is provided for in some way."

"You must be careful what you say, then. For, remember, he does not in the least suspect who it was he ran against in the wood."

"I will not forget. We part friends, do we not, Mr. Hepburn? From my very heart I respect your plain speaking, if it is a little hard to bear. And from my very soul I believe," he added, in a lower tone, "if there were more ministers like you there would be fewer men like me."

He warmly grasped the minister's hand, and hastily left the room. Through the window James Hepburn's eyes followed him anxiously, as he mounted his horse and rode away. There was something loveable about him, terribly loveable, he felt inclined to say, and he sighed heavily over the admission.

All arrangements for Blackwood's defence were in Mr. Laing's hands, and they gave rise for many earnest discussions.

"Talk of a psychological puzzle," he said one day after returning from an interview with the prisoner. "I never came across anything in the least approaching his state of mind. Here is the fellow at this moment worrying himself lest you, Hepburn, should be fretting over the business; and begging me to tell you that whatever may happen he shall still rejoice more over that one action of his life than over any other, and yet seeming absolutely dead and hardened as to anything like feeling about the murder of that poor girl. He says it was done in a moment of passion, without any deliberate intention, and that he is very sorry he did it. But he speaks of it much as I should speak of having accidentally killed some animal I might just as well have spared. If the practice of personally interrogating prisoners only prevailed in this country, I believe we should easily get him off on the plea of insanity."

"It would be a clear gain if we could," Dr. Tweedie said, "for then he would be confined for life. Whereas now, in time, he will be out again, free to do any other mischief which pleases him."

"It cannot be helped," replied Mr. Laing. "It would, I am sure, be useless for counsel to set up the plea of insanity. It is morally he is adrift, not intellectually. Nothing but personal interrogation could bring that out. By-the-way, Hepburn, Sir Maurice Adair seems to be wonderfully interested in the case. I met him at the Chamberlaynes'. He called on me the other day, after seeing you, and said it was the most plucky thing he ever knew a man do; and offered to find any amount of money for the defence. He says he will not lose sight of him."

"So he said to me," replied the minister, a little wearily. He listened to these discussions with a sense of pain and vague bewilderment. How could he hesitate to stand by the man who had made such a splendid sacrifice on his behalf? and yet his evidence, thrown into the scale, would very probably prevent all chance of a man afflicted with the most dangerous of maladies, a diseased morality, being sooner or later turned out upon the world again. Day and night the problem haunted him with a tormenting consciousness that he could produce no clear and valid reason for following a course he felt he must follow, or be a mean spirited scoundrel in his own eyes. Yet ever and again across his perplexed musings would flash the words, "Only love can save," as though they claimed to hold some solution of the enigma, could he but lay hold upon it.

Mossgiel in general was able to arrive at far more clear and definite opinions on the course it behooved him to follow. In the eyes of one section of society he had already set his feet upon the slope of iniquity, and was having his errors impressed upon him by a merciful Providence, which at the same time judiciously emphasized the dangers of that slope by making the way back to the right path exceedingly painful and difficult. It can never be right to do wrong, was, in fact, if not in form, the very safe dictum of this phase of opinion; and even if Mr. Hepburn was wholly ignorant on the subject of the murder, still, by associating with and encouraging Robert Blackwood, he had brought himself into this most unseemly position for a minister, that he was almost compelled to show a special interest in a murderer. The various links in this chain of argument were not very exactly specified. Another section, rather as a rule the outsiders, as far as zealous church membership was concerned, stoutly maintained that Blackwood had

done a very plucky thing, and that any conduct on Mr. Hepburn's part, other than that which he had adopted, would be a disgrace to him, both as a man and a minister. These two phases of opinion, with some modification, represented pretty fairly the whole sentiment of the town, as might easily be divined from reflection on the fact that people must either be zealous religious professors or not. In the former case they are nearly certain to have very clear and trenchant opinions on other people's wrong doings; in the latter, their sympathies are equally sure to be strongly drawn in the direction of pluck, by whomsoever that darling virtue of all true Britons may be manifested.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

A SUMMER CRUISE.

GENERAL FARQUHARSON'S yacht was off the Norwegian coast, and the boat sent ashore in search of letters having just returned, there prevailed an absorbed tranquility among the party on board. Lady Ellinor, alone in her cabin, with flushed cheeks, and eyes which would fill again and again with tears, was reading an account from Mrs. Tweedie of the exciting occurrences in Mossgiel, resulting from the death of poor Mary Warrender.

"Of course, it is all right now as far as Mr. Hepburn goes," Mrs. Tweedie wrote; "but it is a dear-bought clearance, which would never have been needed but for the unfortunate fact that on that day, of all days in the year, Mr. Hepburn could produce no evidence as to where he was just at the hour the girl was drowned. He has evidently felt the thing most deeply; he looks much and aged worn."

Little did Mrs. Tweedie dream of the stab those innocently-intended sentences would inflict on the reader. Why had Mr. Hepburn been compelled to preserve a silence so damaging to himself, and which had laid upon him the cruel pain of the knowledge that another man had been forced voluntarily to risk a shameful death in order to clear his character? That question was very easily answered for Lady Ellinor Farquharson; and crushing the letter in her hand, she leaned her head down on the arm of the sofa on which she was seated, and was sobbing bitterly when General Farquharson entered with an open letter in his hand, so quietly that she did not observe him.

He stood for a few moments watching her with a grieved anxious expression of face. Then, still standing at a little distance, with all his usual decorous affection of tone and manner—

“My dearest Ellinor, I fear you have heard some bad news. Pray tell me what is wrong, my love!”

O misguided man! O golden opportunity let slip! Her heart was full of bitter self-upbraiding. Had he only gently drawn her into his arms, and soothed her with the silent sympathy of mute caresses in her then mood, a burst of full confession would probably have resulted, and his future peace, her future safety and happiness, been assured. The humiliation of a full confession of her folly would have seemed some sort of faint atonement for the evil she had wrought, and the suffering laid upon the noble silent victim, who she knew would rather have faced lasting disgrace and loss of character than clear himself at the cost of one word which might implicate her. As it was, the well-known tone and manner repelled her in a moment, and starting up she hastily dried her eyes.

“Oh, nothing is much amiss,” she said. “I did not hear you coming in, Stuart. I have had a letter from Mrs. Tweedie; it grieved me so much for Mr. Hepburn’s sake.”

“Ah! you have heard then. I was just coming to tell you. Here is a letter from Adair? you had better read it. Poor Hepburn seems to have fallen upon an abominably scandal-loving set of people; but I suppose that is always the case in these small country towns. Adair is wonderfully interested in this poor fellow Blackwood. He seems to be working tremendously hard to try and get him off as lightly as possible. I should hardly have expected so much energy from Adair.”

He paused. A little irrepressible sob had broken from

Lady Ellinor. He sat down beside her, and took her hand.

“Ellinor, my dear, I do not like to see you so easily excited. Indeed, my love, you make me feel quite anxious at times ; your spirits seem very variable. I quite share your sympathy with Mr. Hepburn, whom I consider one of the finest, most manly fellows I have ever seen. But surely there is nothing in all this world should excite you so much? It really makes me dread that you are seriously out of health, and will not allow it.”

“My dear Stuart,” she replied, struggling to repress the irritation his unimpeachable correct demeanour aroused, “I do wish you would give up puzzling your dear honest head over the whims and vagaries of a silly woman. What can you expect? You surround me with luxuries and leave no wish ungratified. That is an enervating sort of life to lead. If you would be cruel to me, or ruin yourself with gambling, so that we had to face reduced circumstances, I daresay I should make a better wife, and be less whimsical and excitable.”

“I do not want a better wife. You are everything I could wish, my love, if only I could feel sure you are in good health, and have everything about you which can add to your happiness. There is Adair’s letter—you can see what he says. I am glad to see the way in which he is acting. I think it greatly to his credit. Come up on deck, my dearest, as soon as you have finished your letters. It is a lovely morning. The fresh air will do you good.”

With these words General Farquharson left the cabin. Lady Ellinor had to get over another fit of violent sobbing before she could swallow the dose of poison her upright and infatuated husband had left for her ; Every word of Sir Maurice Adair’s letter was meant for her ; every sentence

had a double meaning—telling General Farquharson of his admiration for Robert Blackwood's plucky determination to face all consequences rather than let the minister's character suffer in the least degree ; telling Lady Ellinor of his remorse for having been partly instrumental in placing Mr. Hepburn in such a false position, and of his unwearied efforts to lighten Blackwood's punishment, and determination to stand his friend in the future, as the best atonement he could make to the minister for the evil thus unintentionally wrought.

The letter was to Sir Maurice's credit, and that was just the very nature of its poison to Lady Ellinor. Mr. Hepburn's honest, earnest words had not been without their influence, though she would not allow the danger to herself ; and she had welcomed her husband's suggestion of a somewhat extended yachting tour with an alacrity which induced in him a conviction that, on this occasion at least he had hit upon just the right thing. A party altogether to her liking had been got together, including her own favourite sister and one of her brothers ; and Lady Ellinor had herself looked forward hopefully to a summer of much enjoyment. The weather was perfect, the party most satisfactory and yet, although only a few weeks had passed, she was sensible of vague disappointment, and a sort of unsatisfied restlessness. But even yet she did not recognise its source, did not admit to herself that her ardent passionate nature, checked in its natural and lawful development by the formal precision of her husband's devotion, had found in the first sip of the cup of an unlawful passion a satisfying sweetness which it was hard to forego. She strove honestly, and in great measure successfully, not to think about Sir Maurice ; but she failed to grasp the full import of that sense of a void—a something wanting to her full enjoyment—of which she was always more or less conscious. Neither did she give

much heed to the fact that her whole action was far more swayed by the personal influence of James Hepburn than by loyalty to her own husband.

And now Sir Maurice, personally, was forced upon her attention, and forced upon it in a favourable light—favourable at least to her full understanding, or to what she deemed to be her full understanding, of his action in striving to the utmost to mitigate a sentence which, however, just in itself, could not fail to be a source of cruel pain for the man to clear whom it had been voluntarily incurred; and who, but for her own folly and Sir Maurice's ir. situation, would never have stood in need of any such clearance. Lady Ellinor Farquharson passed half-an-hour of most insidious enjoyment, thinking, and thinking with an undisturbed sense of perfect recitude, of the man it was deadly for her to think of at all.

Then she went up on deck, and drank deep another draught of delicious poison. General Farquharson had been telling the story there, and the case was under animated discussion.

"Oh, here comes Nellie!" exclaimed her sister, a beautiful enthusiastic girl, several years younger than herself. "Do read us Sir Maurice's letter, Nell?"

"Mrs. Tweedie's will be best," Lady Ellinor said, handing back Sir Maurice's letter to General Farquharson, as she seated herself, and proceeded forthwith to read the account she had received, with a few suppressions here and there, as the possible causes of suspicion against the minister.

"I never heard such a romantic story," exclaimed Lady Agnes. "I always liked Sir Maurice Adair; I shall like him better still now for trying to help that poor fellow. It was so noble of him to come forward that way and clear Mr. Hepburn. I hope they will get him off altogether."

"You approve, then, of young men being allowed to murder their sweethearts with impunity," said Major Farquharson, a cousin of the General's. "That will be a dangerous license, Lady Agnes, where young women who are inclined to be coquettes are in question."

"No, I don't mean that," said Lady Agnes, looking a little puzzled. "What do I mean, Stuart? I don't think it was murder exactly."

"Well, it certainly lacks the element which we generally include in what we mean by murder, in that it was the result of a sudden impulse, without a shadow of any premeditation. But I think what you mean, Agnes, is that his action in respect of Mr. Hepburn is so noble and generous, that it blinds us to the extent of the previous crime."

"Yes, I think that is it. Because it isn't as if Mr. Hepburn was going to be tried, and he had confessed to prevent him from being hung. He has risked being hung himself, merely to save him from a vague suspicion. I think it is very noble of him."

"There is no doubt about that," said Major Farquharson.

"The puzzle is, how comes a fellow capable of killing his sweetheart in a fit of jealousy to be equal to such a piece of heroic self-sacrifice?"

"When you see and know Mr. Hepburn you will be better able to understand that," replied Lady Ellinor. "I have heard strange stories of him from some poor women whom I visit in Mossiel; such pathetic stories, sometimes, of the strange love some of the lowest outcasts in the town have for him. I am sure I do not wonder. He forces one to love him."

"Halloa, Stuart," exclaimed his cousin, with a laugh. "This is getting serious—a Free Church minister, forsooth!"

"I think I am much of Ellinor's mind," replied General Farquharson with a smile. "There is something about him which irresistibly invites confidence."

"No doubt he is very charming," said Lady Agnes. "But I consider Sir Maurice Adair is the hero of the story. It is pure kindness on his part to work so hard for the poor fellow."

"Adair is an uncommonly fine fellow," said Major Farquharson. "We were in the same regiment when he was a youngster. He was an immense favourite both with officers and men. A fine, generous, manly fellow, with nothing low or mean about him."

"I am quite sure of that. Do write to him, Nell, and tell him how much we admire his action, and urge him to leave no means untried to get the poor fellow off."

Lady Ellinor had turned away while Major Farquharson had been speaking, and was intent, apparently, upon watching a boat in the distance. She answered her sister without turning her head.

"I have no doubt Sir Maurice will need no exhorting."

"How prosaic you are, Nellie! You ought to be in a red-hot fever of admiration of Sir Maurice. I have a great mind to set all propriety at defiance and write to him myself."

"I think you had better let me be the sender of your message, Agnes," said General Farquharson. "I shall be writing to Adair shortly. There is no need for Ellinor to trouble herself with being your secretary. And now, if any of you have letters you want to answer you had better set to work. The boat must go back in two hours' time. We are to be off again this afternoon."

This broke up the party. Only Lady Ellinor remained where she was sitting.

"If you have no letters to write, Ellinor, take a turn

with me," said her husband ; and as she rose he drew her arm through his, and keeping her hand in his own, walked slowly up and down the deck with her, discussing the details of their further cruise and consulting all her wishes with an affectionate earnestness which forced her, at last, unable to endure it longer, to plead some excuse for going below. And when, an hour afterwards, they all met at luncheon, General Farquharson sighed to observe that there were traces of tears about his wife's face which had certainly not been perceptible when they were pacing the deck together.

The yacht was turned southwards that afternoon, with the programme of the whole cruise fully sketched out. The summer, and as much of the autumn as was found suitable for yachting, were to be spent in the Mediterranean ; one and another of the party being dropped at different places, according as their arrangements or necessities demanded ; until, finally, General and Lady Ellinor Farquharson and her sister were to be left at Cannes, to join a large circle of friends who were to spend the winter there.

Lady Ellinor acquiesced in all these arrangements with a sort of listless indifference at heart, which she did her best to conceal under an assumption of lively interest. It seemed to her that she cared very little where she was, or where she went. Life had suddenly grown very dull and monotonous. She could hardly believe that she was the same woman who had felt joyous and light-hearted enough three years ago, and able to find pleasure in a hundred trifles which all now seemed void of all possible interest. Only her husband was so kind, so anxious she should be happy, that she loyally made the most persistent efforts to seem so.

The arrangements, however, after all, underwent some modification. Randolph Forbes was to have been left at

Malta, to return to England by steamer. But letters awaiting the party at Gibraltar somewhat abridged his idle time, and without forcing him to return home instantly, left the Malta arrangement very doubtful, as there was every chance increased delay would be caused by the yacht just missing a steamer.

“Let us run up as far as Naples,” General Farquharson suggested. “You can return to England by land from there, and we shall still reach the Ionian Islands in plenty of time for all we want.”

“Delightful suggestion,” exclaimed Lady Agnes Forbes. “Then we can stay there for a few days before we go and explore Crete. A few days ashore will be a pleasant variety.”

Into the Bay of Naples accordingly the yacht shortly steamed, and the whole party were soon comfortably established, with the intention of spending a few days, at least, on dry land. On one of these days it chanced that Lady Ellinor, feeling disinclined for some afternoon excursion which was in prospect, determined to stay at home. The rest of the party had not left the room very many minutes, and she was standing at the window, looking out with a sad, wistful gaze over the sea, when the door opened. She did not turn round, thinking it to be a servant. In another moment a voice said—

“Lady Ellinor Farquharson.”

With a sudden flush, and with every trace of sadness swept away from her face, she turned hastily. Sir Maurice Adair was standing near her.

“This is a most unexpected meeting to me,” he said, “General Farquharson gave me a sketch of your plans. Naples seemed far off your intended route. I never was more amazed in my life than when I met your party at the

door a moment since. General Farquharson told me I should find you here, and bade me come and pay my respects. I hope I am not rash in obeying him."

He spoke a little hurriedly, and with a good deal of nervous agitation in his manner. Lady Ellinor was outwardly more composed, but her varying colour was very significant.

"I am very pleased to see you," she said. "I had no idea you were out of Great Britain."

"I have been roaming about for some time. I have felt very restless and uneasy. I wished so much to write to you, but feared to do so. I suppose you have heard from Mossgiel."

"Yes. From Mrs. Tweedie."

"Then you will well imagine how great has been my self-reproach; both on Mr. Hepburn's account, and far, far more on your own. That man was evidently skulking about the woods. But for Mr. Hepburn's interference, that fact might have caused my infatuated senseless folly to result in scandal which would have been distressing to you. I have so longed to ask you to forgive me."

"Please do not let us speak of the past, Sir Maurice," she said. "I cannot promise forgiveness where I feel the blame is quite as much due to me as to you. In fact, I think I am most to blame. Let us say no more about it. We were both very foolish, very wrong. We have both deep cause for gratitude to the man on whom the punishment of our folly has fallen. The remembrance of what we have brought upon him should be enough to make us more careful in future. Let us resolve to accept the lesson, and say no more about the matter."

"It shall be as you please, Lady Ellinor. If only I know you have forgiven me."

"Enough," she said, with a smile. His evident agitation seemed to aid her in preserving composure, of manner at least. "Tell me now the result of your efforts on behalf of Blackwood."

"Not now. Please do not ask me to stay now. I only came that I might have a chance of these few words alone with you. I feel so nervous, so agitated. I should fear exciting remark if any one should chance to come in. A case of a burnt child. After the risk to which I madly exposed you, I tremble at a shadow. General Farquharson has asked me to dine with you this evening. I shall be more at ease then, and can tell you all I know."

"Good," she said, with a smile. "You shall have your own way. We shall meet at dinner time."

With a hurried salutation, Sir Maurice Adair left the room. If he had blinded himself before, he could do so no longer. The sudden, unexpected encounter had torn down the flimsy veil of all pretence, and his extreme agitation had by no means arisen wholly, if it had done so at all, from the plausible cause he had assigned. He had been barely master enough of himself to resist throwing himself at her feet, and kissing the folds of her gown. If in future he did not wholly avoid every chance of meeting her, save under the safeguard of complete publicity, he sinned against light and knowledge.

She also might well have learned as much, from the feeling of light-hearted gaiety which came stealing over her. Naples, the yacht, everything seemed so much more enjoyable than it had done half an-hour previously. Whether she confessed as much to herself or not, she hastily rose from the chair by the window, where she had dreamed away the afternoon, when she heard sounds of the return of the party, and went to her dressing-room, feeling a sudden shrinking

from meeting her husband's eye, with that tell-tale gladness on her face.

Sir Maurice Adair was composed enough when he again entered the room, and Lady Ellinor received him with easy cordiality.

"My sister is dying to hear about all your efforts on Blackwood's behalf," she said. "You must really relieve her anxiety, or she will be able to eat no dinner."

"Well, really, Lady Agnes," said Sir Maurice, "I cannot commend him to you as a worthy hero of romance. If I had not had such indisputable proof of his disinterested devotion to Mr. Hepburn, I could never have believed him capable of it. A more silent, surly, impassible sort of fellow I never came across.

"But he will not be hung, will he?"

"Oh, no. There is no doubt he will get off with penal servitude. The trial was just coming on when I left the country. I saw him just before I started, and told him that, whatever happened, when he was a free man, to come straight to me, and I would take care and provide him with some settled employment. He thanked me, but upon my word, I am not sure he would not rather I had let him alone. I really doubt if he is quite sound mentally. His manner was very odd at times. I saw him several times. I cannot understand what can be the source of Mr. Hepburn's influence over him."

"How very disappointing," said Lady Agnes. "I had been picturing him a sort of modern Claud Duval."

"He would be a handsome fellow enough, if he had not such a constant heavy scowl on his face. As it is, he is certainly far from being an interesting criminal."

"But you will not allow any prejudice against him to influence you," said Lady Ellinor, with a little tremour in her voice. "Think of what he has done, not of what he is."

Sir Maurice turned an eloquent look upon her, and there was some little trace of emotion in his voice as he answered—

“After all he has done for Mr. Hepburn, can you doubt my doing the very utmost, now or hereafter, that is in my power to help him?”

Lady Agnes Forbes glanced quickly from Sir Maurice Adair to her sister, and then back again. Later in the evening, when they were drinking coffee, and she was standing a little apart with General Farquharson, she said—

“What is there in this Mr. Hepburn which fascinates everyone? Nellie was never given to taking violent likings to clergyman, and he seems to have taken you and Sir Maurice Adair captive as well. It is very wonderful. A Free Church minister, too! What is he like?”

“Mr. Hepburn? He is a tall, almost gaunt man, with a somewhat rugged face, and very fine eyes,” replied General Farquharson. “And should you ever chance to come across him, my dear Agnes, when you are in any trouble or perplexity, I would not mind risking a good deal on the prediction that you will find yourself, very shortly, telling him everything, and seeking his guidance and counsel.”

“Oh, then I suppose he is Father Confessor to both Nellie and Sir Maurice.”

“I don’t know,” answered her brother-in-law, with a slight sigh. “But if he is, I can only say, I think it is an uncommonly good thing for both.”

That night Lady Ellinor Farquharson came, after the party had broken up for the night, into her husband’s dressing room.

“Stuart,” she said. “you will think me very capricious; but I should much like to go at once, and not remain any longer here. It seems very silly, but I don’t know that I can give you any reason.”

"You have given quite reason enough, my love, in saying that you wish it. I will give orders the first thing in the morning. I do not know that there is anything to prevent our getting under way to-morrow afternoon."

"Thank you. You are very good to me, Stuart." And then she came towards him, with a strange wistful look in her eyes, and lifted her beautiful face for a kiss, which General Farquharson at once bestowed, saying as he did so—

"Reward me, then, my love, by letting me see a little colour on those pale cheeks, You were looking much brighter to-day at dinner, but the colour is all gone again."

With something almost like a shiver Lady Ellinor turned and left the room. General Farquharson thought he perfectly understood the case, and was far too chivalrous to ask questions. It was so very probable that Sir Maurice Adair had caused Lady Ellinor some uneasiness in that undefined manner which it is almost impossible to hint at in words, without giving too much consistency to the impression. "I only hope," he thought to himself, "he is not going to lose his head. I cannot have Ellinor subjected to any annoyance of that sort."

The yacht steamed out of the bay the next evening towards sunset. Sir Maurice Adair watched it through his glass, with a pale, set face, and the next morning he started for Paris.

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CHAPTER XXV.

DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW.

“Y’E’LL no tak’ it ill, sir, if I keep clear o’ ye a’thegither when I’am oot again?”

Thus spoke Robert Blackwood to Mr. Hepburn during the minister’s farewell visit to him, before his departure for the place of his imprisonment. Mr. Hepburn smiled half sadly.

“That is a long looking forward, Blackwood,” he said. “Still I should like to know what put the idea into your head?”

“It’ll may be no sae lang as ye think, sir. I may get out sooner. Sir Maurice Adair says he’ll spare nae effort to get me out on a ticket-of-leave, as soon as there’s a possibility. But what was in my mind was, if I kept aloof frae ye, ye might think I was sulkin’, an’ regrettin’ what I’ve dune. Never ye think that, sir, whatever ye do. I kent weel enouch they might hang me, but if I’d been certain they would, I’d no hae gien it a thocht against clearin’ ye. I’d fain hae been able to do something for ye, that wadna hae vexit ye like. But I’m prood’ a’ the same, to show I wad serve you if I could.”

“But then why hold aloof?”

Blackwood was silent for a moment or two. Then he said, “Weel, sir, I’ve thocht a deal about ye, an’ I think it’s a kind o’ a superstitious feelin’. I’d aye a great notion o’ ye, frae the first you cam’ to Mossiel ; an’ then, the first thing, I was like to hae blown yer brains out. Then, after yer gudeness to me, I wud hae laid down my life for ye ;

an' the next thing I do is to go an' get ye into about the warst trouble which could weel happen to a minister. It's a sort o' fear's upon me, if I dinna keep out o' yer way, I'll maybe do ye some worse mischief yet ; sae whenever I do get out, I've a mind to keep aff ye. If there's aught to tell about me, that it'll please ye to hear, I'll be proud to let you ken. But I'll no come nigh ye mysel'."

Supposing that that distant possibility found him still Free Church minister in Mossgiel, there might be advantages in that resolution, Mr. Hepburn thought. He had been allowed frequent intercourse with the prisoner, and had, unfortunately, no reason to think, from the general tenor of his remarks, that Blackwood's avowed intention, if he escaped with penal servitude, of sooner or later attempting again the avenging of his own real or supposed wrongs and now of Mary Warrender's death, had undergone any modification. It was not difficult to see that, as regarded the murder of the girl, he looked upon himself as a sort of irresponsible instrument in the perpetration of another person's crime. Mr. Hepburn had not been slow to improve, after his own fashion, his chances of frequent interviews with Blackwood, and his keen study of human nature in general, and special interest in the phase thereof now under his notice, had rendered him quick to detect indications o' mental and moral phenomena which might easily have escaped more ordinary observers. To such the case would probably have appeared a perfectly simple one—a man of outrageously jealous disposition, and extremely violent temper, acting on a sudden impulse of fury. So far that judgment was correct enough, and Mr. Hepburn would have heartily acquiesced therein : but a good deal more than that was discernible to him. Watching and weighing the import of every word which fell from the prisoner, as a medical man notes every pulse beat, or other

symptom in a patient in a critical state, he had noted strong evidence of, in some directions, a kind of moral paralysis. Robert Blackwood was unquestionably grieved and shocked at Mary Warrender's murder ; but it seemed to affect him entirely as though it had been the act of another person. He was mentally conscious that the act was his own, but there seemed to be no moral response to that consciousness. He was undoubtedly sorry he had done it ; but it hardly seemed to Mr. Hepburn as if his regret went even the length of Mr. Laing's parallel, of killing some animal he might as well have spared. It seemed to him more akin to the feeling of anyone who had, all unwittingly, administered to some sick person a medicine with which some one else had mixed poison.

And yet, in the midst of all this moral perversion of feeling, he was keenly alive to the possibility of any action on his part being a cause of pain or regret to Mr. Hepburn. It was verily a tangled skein, and when after a kind and earnest entreaty that he would try utterly to forget the past, and live his future life, when once more a free man, as though that past had never been, Mr. Hepburn took a final leave of him, it was with a distinct consciousness that if it might be that Blackwood should not live to regain his freedom, a terrible weight would be lifted off himself. -

Mr. Hepburn paid a visit the next day to Maggie Blackwood. The girl had always borne herself an excellent character, being only held as "dour" as all the rest of the family ; but she, like a great many other people, had succumbed to the minister's peculiar power. In the first moments of her grief over the fate of her favourite brother, her bleeding heart had turned with all the unerring instinct of suffering to the strong, tender nature, whose sympathy was strengthening and supporting, not enervating ; and she

had ever since had, for him at least, that smile which had such a transfiguring influence in the Blackwood face.

"Weel Maggie," he said with a sigh, "our poor boy's away to pay the penalty of his brave honesty."

"Ay, sir, I kent ye wad say it that way. There's some that talks o' his paying the penalty o' his crime. But I'm proud o' my brither the day for a' that."

"I don't wonder at that. But Maggie, how came he, able to act so nobly, to be guilty of such a crime?"

The girl was standing by the table. Leaning forward with her tightly clasped hands resting upon it, she fixed her full, dark eyes on the minister, and answered earnestly.

"Rob didna' ken what he was doing, sir. I'm as certain o' that, as that yer standing here yersel.' I'll no say that he hasna dune mony a wrang thing, but it wasna in him to lay hand on a woman, in his sober senses, even though he might be angry. He was just aff his heid."

"Yes. With jealous fury."

The girl shook her head. "That may hae set him aff, but that wasna all. Rob's nae just like ither people."

"Do you mean that his mind is affected?"

"Weel, sir, its no just easy to tell ye. The maist o' his time Rob's heid is as guid a one as man need have. But whiles I've kent him a bit strange an' no like his ordinar' sel'. Ye see, sir, we were aye great frien's, an' I'm thinkin' I'll likely hae noticed it mair than the ithers. When he's been excited, onyway, not only wi' anger, I've kent Rob do things he'd very little mind about afterwards. An' mair than aince, forbye that, I've seen him in a queer state, quite stupid like for a minute or twa, and hardly seemin' to understand what was said to him. It would be for only a minute, an' then pass, an' the maist o' folk would think, maybe, he was just not attendin'; but I dinna think it was that way quite."

"Did he ever drink hard?"

"No, sir, Rob was ne'er gien to that. He might whiles tak' a wee drap too much, out wi' frien's, but he was ne'er a hard drinker. He's the best o' a' my brithers that way. But he is vindictive, I canna deny that. I'm sair grieved for puir Mary, but she brought it on herself, sir. She wasna fair and straightforward wi' Rob?"

"Was she really encouraging some other man?"

"Rob believed it, sir. Whether it was true I canna say. But she didna treat Rob fairly. Syne he took a notion o' her, she'd never cause to say he gave a thocht to ony ither lassie, and she wasna fair to him. Whiles she thocht she would, an' whiles she thocht she wouldn't tak' him; and whiles she'd twit him wi' her ain folk saying he was after her bit money, and that angered Rob sair, for he was never ane to think o' money. I dinna weel ken a' that went on, but I warned Mary lang syne she'd drive him too far. She was just a flirt, an' I'd gey weel gien her up o' late, though we used to be great frien's. It angered me to see the way she treated Rob, and he really did care for her."

"Then you have no idea who it is he suspected?"

"No, sir, I canna settle it on onybody. But there's one thing I'm certain, sir, if Rob ever comes across him, he'll kill him like a dog, noo."

"He's safe enough for years to come; at any rate."

"Do ye real' credit that, sir?" the girl said, with almost a scornful intonation. "It'll be a queer prison that hauds Rob lang."

"He cannot possibly escape!" exclaimed the startled minister.

"Ye'll see, sir. When Rob gives his mind to a thing, he's no often foiled. An' there's mony a thing possible to him that's no possible to ither men. Ye see he's been that

much at sea, he can handle ropes and climb as nae landsman can ; and he's gude at a heap o' things on land forbye."

"But if he did escape he would be certain to be taken again directly."

The girl smiled. "Ye dinna ken Rob, sir ; he's a long heid when he gives his mind to a thing quietly. I ken ye'll never do him an ill turn, sae I dinna mind tellin' ye, he's laid a' his plans. He tauld Adam that much, when he tauld him what he was goin' to do. He thocht they'd likely gie him penal servitude, an' he tauld Adam he would just stay in it as long as till he saw a guid chance to escape. He'll no risk a foolish venture, but he'll just watch for his chance, an' be ready. He said he'd likely no come near ony o' us ; he'd maybe have to get oot of the country for a time. But whenever we get a card by the post, wi' certain words on't we'd ken he was oot ; an' we wad hear mair o' him some day. He'll likely gang off to oor cousin's in New Zealand, an' I hope he may. For I'll hae nae peace when I ken he's free, for fear o' murder, sae long as he is in this country."

Most heartily could James Hepburn say Amen to that hope. The thought of Robert Blackwood escaping had never occurred to him, and the suggestion was a most unwelcome one. If he did go off to New Zealand, well and good. But if he remained at large in this country, unable to seek honest employment, and forced to find concealment among the criminal classes, his downward course would be sure and rapid, and the scaffold he had once escaped, would almost certainly be his ultimate fate.

The idea haunted him, and he found himself impressing upom himself the difficulties attending any such attempt—the initial difficulty of making the escape ; then that of getting rid of the prison dress ; the marked individuality of Blackwood's appearance, with many other

impediments to be overcome, with more persistency than seemed quite consistent with a firm conviction of their insuperable nature. Prisoners had been known to escape, though not frequently, and there was not only, in Blackwood's case, unusual strength, agility and daring, but far more power of mental calculation and forecast, than belongs in general to the criminal classes. Moreover, his sister's words seemed to point to deliberate preparation, made before his liberty was in any way abridged. In the very moment of making a most heroic sacrifice to clear the character of an innocent man, he seemed to have been coolly laying his plans to avoid paying the penalty of that sacrifice beyond the smallest fraction possible. He was an insoluble enigma, for in the minister's mind lay not only the thought of his conduct towards himself, but the memory of the almost passionate tremulousness of the tone in which he had declared that he would lay down his life for Lady Ellinor Farquharson.

And yet, how easy is sometimes the solution of a deep and difficult problem, if you only alter your point of view. While all the minister's anxious pondering and studying brought him little light, the whole question to other minds was as clear and easy of settlement as a simple sum of arithmetic. It had been the subject of an animated discussion at a large dinner party at the Watsons', near about the time of Mr. Hepburn's visit to Maggie Blackwood.

"To my thinking," said Mr. Campbell, a stout, peremptory sort of man, comfortably convinced that the opinion of a first-rate manager of a prosperous wine business must be a valuable contribution to the settlement of any possible question, "it's much to be regretted the fellow was not hung straight off. I don't hold with this getting off on the plea of insanity."

"That's just what he did not do," said Mr. Laing. "The plea set up was simply that his action lacked all the elements of murder, because he chanced upon the girl quite unexpectedly at the moment; that it was a sudden impulse of furious jealousy. His family tendency was merely advanced as a reason for his being more likely than other men to be seized by a sudden impulse."

"Then you must remember, Campbell," put in Mr. Lorri-mer, who approached that side of the subject with more alacrity than most of the party, "his voluntary confession in order to clear Mr. Hepburn. You can't expect but that that fact should have weight."

"Oh, I expect nothing at all. I call all that sort of thing sentiment. If a man commits a murder he ought to be hung for it, that's my idea, unless, of course, you can prove that he was unconscious that he was doing it. If a man isn't too mad to know what he is doing, he isn't too mad to be punished for doing it."

"Quite right, Mr. Campbell," said Mr. Wylie. "That's a very safe and simple rule, and one I am very glad to see the judges are inclined to enforce more strictly. There's been a great deal too much of this scientific hair-splitting of late, over cases of this sort. I can quite understand the inclination to let Blackwood off, on account of his plucky honesty, but as for the irresistible impulse theory, it's all rot."

"What do you say, Tweedie?" asked the host.

Dr. Tweedie shook his head with a smile. "That's out of my line," he said. "We ordinary practitioners do not gain the sort of knowledge necessary to enable us to form judgments worth much on such points."

"At any rate you can form a common sense judgment," said Mr. Wylie rather insolently, "and that I take it is about what is wanted."

"That is just what I should expect you to think," replied Dr. Tweedie, quietly. "The common sense judgment, I imagine pretty fairly represents the legal judgment in general. In questions of medical science, however, a common sense judgment is pretty nearly an equivalent term for a comprehensive ignorance judgment; and comprehensive ignorance is a wonderful clearer away of all difficulties in the way of reaching an opinion. My position is not comprehensive ignorance, but partial knowledge, so I do not find it quite so easy to reach settled opinions."

"I should like to hear you discuss that question with some of our leading judges," retorted Mr. Wylie, looking rather angry.

"I shouldn't attempt it. I see no use in talking to a man about a subject he doesn't in the least understand."

Mr. Laing gave a short quick laugh. "You are terribly profane, Tweedie."

"Yes, when lawyers make excursions into the domain of science. In their own department I am often amazed at the mental power they display. But I cannot regard their scientific utterances as valuable contributions to the sum of human knowledge."

"Then do you mean," asked Mr. Lorrimer, "that you think Blackwood was not responsible?"

"I am not in possession of data sufficient to justify my opinion. I am neither well up in the subject from a scientific standpoint, nor have I any intimate knowledge of the facts of his particular case. All that I can safely venture to affirm is, that his mental and moral condition is a very peculiar one."

"Pity it wasn't put an end to with a few yards of rope then," said Mr. Campbell. "That's my opinion, and the opinion of most people in town, I believe. For my part, I can only

say I hope the judges will stick firmly to the practice of holding to plain, tangible facts, and not allow the foisting in of this moral and mental phenomena business, in simple cases of murder."

"It will certainly simplify the administration of the law," replied Dr. Tweedie, quietly. And with that the subject dropped.

By degrees, as time wore on, the idea of Robert Blackwood's possible escape faded a good deal out of Mr. Hepburn's mind. His work was heavy, as is certain to be the work of a man to whom the outcasts, the destitute, and the sorrowing instinctively turn their pleading eyes in the hour of despair. But Mcssgiel seemed to be growing, in some way, more congenial to him. He was inclined to lay the fact to the negative cause of the removal of his heaviest sources of anxiety, but in truth Mr. Laing's prophecy was beginning to show the first indications of fulfilment. Men, and women too, are oftentimes better than their creed, and the tribute of silent respect was, in reality, paid by many who still professed to censure his action in regard of all the past scandals. He had shown himself strong, true, and fearless, and all Mossgiel knew that no amount of personal effort or sacrifice weighed with him for a moment, where suffering could be relieved, sorrow lightened, or distress alleviated. These things will tell, and both respect and affection were surely, if as yet not very openly, growing; silently working their way, until some accident should cause them suddenly to burst into full and vigorous life.

Strathellon continued empty and silent, so Mossgiel was thrown back upon its own internal resources for gossip. Mrs Tweedie had an occasional letter from Lady Ellinor Farquharson, showing that she had no intention that those who might have been gainers by her presence at Strath-

ellon should be losers by her absence. But those letters told Mr. Hepburn nothing. She spoke little of herself, and merely allowed it to appear, rather as an inference than a positive assertion, that she would be at Strathellon again sometime towards the beginning of the ensuing summer.

That she and Sir Maurice Adair were safely apart was about all the minister knew. Of his whereabouts and general proceeding Mossgiel knew very little, when Strathellon was not a connecting link between it and Dunkerran. The place was not very far distant from Mossgiel, but all its connections lay in a completely different direction, the separating distance being chiefly composed of wild rough moorland, so that communication by anything like a road involved very much longer journey than the actual distance in a straight line. It was chiefly through Mr. Laing's acquaintance with the Chamberlaynes that Mr. Hepburn heard from time to time, enough of Sir Maurice Adair, to know that though he was not very persistently at Dunkerran, he was certainly not anywhere in the neighborhood of Cannes. So far so well, and the minister tried to be very hopeful; but the feeling would not come at his bidding. He could not conceal from himself that the mere fact of his feeling such extreme satisfaction in the knowledge that Lady Ellinor and Sir Maurice were personally apart, was the strongest of proofs of his own deep-seated conviction that the circumstances of both were fraught with dangerous possibilities. Until the day when he could regard personal association as wholly unimportant for Lady Ellinor Farquharson, he could feel no well assured confidence of her safety, and save in the apparently most improbable case of a total change in her relations to her husband, that could never be until many a long year had passed over her head.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PREDICTIONS VERIFIED.

JAMES HEPBURN had not failed to make the chaplain of the prison where Robert Blackwood was working out his sentence fully acquainted with the peculiar circumstances of the case, and of his own earnest wish to be kept well informed of everything concerning the prisoner, and his wishes had been kindly and fully met.

"He is, I think," the chaplain wrote, after Blackwood had been for some time under his supervision, "at once the best conducted, and most unsatisfactory prisoner with whom I have ever had to deal. He is perfectly quiet and orderly. I do not think, since he came here, that he has ever been even reprov'd? but he is as hard and cold as a stone outwardly, though, all the time, I always feel as if under the stone there was boiling lava. To me he is always civil and respectful in manner. He listens quietly to all I have to say, but as for drawing any response from him, I might as well talk to a statue. His face always wears the same slightly sullen expression, and he speaks very little to anyone. He seems to me to be always quietly watching everything that goes on; but he is a most inscrutable character. Watching him during divine service, the time when of course I have most chance of doing so unobserved, it seems to me as though he is constantly brooding over something. My strong impression is that he will some day do something desperate, but most of the officials are inclined to laugh at my prognostication. They hold him to be a better educated, and, as far

social position goes, superior man to the mass of our prisoners, therefore more amenable to discipline, and with more mental capacity for calculating the advantages of such persistent good conduct as may ensure his freedom at the earliest possible date. Time will show who is in the right."

Reading the circumstances by the light of Maggie Blackwood's information, Mr. Hepburn had little difficulty in arriving at an opinion on that subject; and, in reply, he went so far as to say that he certainly fully expected to hear some day that Blackwood had given them a surprise. Further than that he would not go. That the prisoner should not succeed in escaping was his own most fervent wish, but he could not in the most indirect way interfere with him. The one fact which, come what might, must ever rule his action with respect to Blackwood was, that to him he owed it that he stood before the world with a perfectly unblemished character.

As has been said, however, by degrees, amidst all the pressure of innumerable subjects for meditation which fall to the share of the minister of a town congregation, who is at once a hard worker and a deep student, the thought of any such escape dropped somewhat out of Mr. Hepburn's mind. Save when he chanced to see Maggie Blackwood, there was little in his daily associations to keep her brother in his thoughts.

When, therefore, one evening in the following spring, he was told that the sergeant of police wanted to see him, he ordered him to be admitted, without any thought beyond a passing wonder what ne'er-do-well was in trouble now? A visit to him in search of antecedents was, under these circumstances, no unusual occurrence. It had come to be a sort of recognised fact in Mossiel, that if the truth about any outcast in the town was to be found out, the information

wanted was most likely to be got from the Free Church minister.

"Well, sergeant," he said, as the man entered, "who is it now?"

With professional caution the man waited until the door was closed. Then coming forward, so that he faced Mr. Hepburn full, he fixed a keen glance upon him, and quietly answered—

"Robert Blackwood has escaped, sir."

"Ha!" exclaimed the minister, with a sudden start. At the moment the man spoke he had been reaching across the table for a paper-knife with which to mark the place in the book he was reading at which he had been interrupted, so he had not observed the glance fixed on himself. With his exclamation he looked up, caught the steady gaze, and returned it with a half-amused look, adding only to his first utterance the single word,

"Well!"

The sergeant half smiled. "I didn't think I should catch you, sir. But I suppose you know nothing about it?"

"My good friend, I know nothing on earth about it, at this moment. But I tell you plainly, should I come to know anything, I shall tell you nothing; neither should I give you the slightest aid, if I came to know where he is"

The man looked grave. "It's a very serious thing, sir, prisoners escaping this way. It's a great encouragement to others to try, if they see one succeed in getting safe off."

"Very likely, and it is your duty to leave no stone unturned to try and bring about Blackwood's capture, even to the length, if you like, of setting a man to track my movements. But it is equally my duty not to be such a rascally sneak as to move a finger in the matter. But sit down and tell me all about it."

"I've nothing to tell, as yet, sir. I only just got the telegram half-an-hour since. He made his escape this morning, sometime, but I know no particulars. I'm just going to set——"

"Hold your tongue, man!" exclaimed Mr. Hepburn. "Don't tell me what you are going to do. I don't want to hear a word. I tell you plainly, Blackwood, to me, is simply the man who put a halter around his own neck to clear my character. I am very sorry he has made his escape, but not only shall in no way betray him, but if he comes to me for any help, I shall do my utmost to aid his escape. Not that I think he will apply to me. I merely warn you of what I should do if he did."

The sergeant shook his head. "I can't think you are in the right, sir."

"I have not the least wish to hear what you think," replied the minister, with some asperity. Then he added more gently, "You must remember the circumstances of this case are, as far as they concern me, very peculiar. Your duty is perfectly clear, so is mine. Where that is the case, the less possible consequences are looked at the better."

"Would you like, sir, to hear any particulars of his escape, when I know them? I can't think how he can have managed it. I know the place. I should have said it was quite impossible. But he is sure to be taken. The prison dress alone will be safe to run him in."

"I shall most likely hear particulars from the chaplain," replied Mr. Hepburn. "He has written to me more than once."

The sergeant retired to take all his measures, leaving the minister speculating with some little amusement whether putting a strict watch on his movements would be one of them? and made fully conscious, by the feelings called up

by the man's last assertion, that the natural instincts of every true-born Briton were strong within him ; and that, in spite of all that reason or judgment could say, there was a strong wish within him that Blackwood might not be retaken.

The anticipated letter arrived the next afternoon.

"Blackwood," the chaplain wrote, "has abundantly verified your prediction that he would give us a surprise some day. He has made the most extraordinary escape ever made from here, one the incredible daring of which you cannot picture to yourself unless you knew the spot. To give you an idea of it, I must explain that there is within the prison a paved court, shut in on three sides by the main body of the building. Along the fourth side runs a wall some twenty feet in height, against which are built some outhouses, used for various purposes. During a strong gale a few nights since a heavy chimney-pot from the higher buildings fell on the roof of one of those outhouses and did some damage. Blackwood said he could easily repair it, as he understood the work. He was sent to do it, with a single warder in charge, the place being considered absolutely safe, as the drop on the outer side of the wall is over forty feet. What happened further is to some extent a matter of conjecture. Some time later a warder, going accidentally into the court for something, found the warder who had accompanied Blackwood lying on the ground insensible, bleeding profusely from a terrible blow on the head. The short ladder, taken for use in mending the slates, was standing against the outhouse ; of Blackwood there was no trace. It is simply impossible that he could have escaped through the prison. Over that more than forty feet wall he had gone in some way ; and there is only one way in which he could have done it. Near the prison wall grows a magnificent beech tree, of most

unusual size, the outer branches of which extend to within a few feet of the wall. Incredible as it appears, there seems to be little doubt that Blackwood must have taken a flying leap into the tree, on the chance of catching the boughs, and that he thus got to the ground and made his escape. As the only alternative is that he jumped sheer off a wall over forty feet in height, on to very rough ground, and escaped uninjured, we are obliged to accept this hypothesis : but I think nothing short of that fact would induce any of us to believe it possible. Blackwood is, I believe, a practised seaman, and one of our warders, who was at sea as a young fellow, says he thinks he has known of as daring feats safely accomplished by sailors under desperate conditions. Nothing has as yet been heard of the prisoner, but search parties are out, and as he was in his prison dress, we look on his re-capture as a matter of certainty. The warder is not, the doctor thinks, in serious danger, but he has lost a good deal of blood, and is very weak, so no questions have as yet been put to him. He is to be kept as quiet as possible for a few days."

Mr. Hepburn at once put on his hat and went in search of Maggie Blackwood. The girl answered his knock with an expression of subdued triumph on her face.

"I tell't ye, sir," she said, "Rob wadna bide ower lang in yonder place."

"Then you have had your card?"

"Not yet, sir. Rob wad likely no post it till he got a gude bit awa!"

The minister was conscious of a distinct sensation of disappointment. More likely he had been already retaken; but had not reached the prison when the chaplain wrote.

"How did you hear of his escape then?" he asked.

"The police were down, an' I doubt they're watchin' the

hoose the noo. They'll no tak' ower much by that move, I'm thinkin'."

"I can tell you all about the escape," Mr. Hepburn said.

"Eh, sir! Are ye in it?"

"No. But I've heard," and he read the chaplain's letter. The girl was sobbing with excitement before he had done.

"Eh, but that's gran! I'm prood o' Rob. Nae sneakin' oot as if he hadn't the courage to fight for't. I ken't he'd do it like a man, when he did."

"How about the warder, Maggie?"

"Weel, sir, ye see yersel' what the doctor says. He isn't in serious danger. Do you ken what a blow from Rob is? Do you think he didna try no to hit him harder than was needfu'. If Rob hadna been minded to spare him a' he could, do ye think he'd ever have spoken again? Na, na. I ken my ain brither richt weel. Rob is vindictive, I'll no deny that, and he thinks he's been wranged; but he wadna hurt an insect o' his ain free will. But I'm sair feared, sir, he just lookit on the warder as bein' between him an' his vengeance. I do hope he'll gang aff to New Zealand. I'll be anxious till we hear somethin'. Will I let you ken when we get the card?"

"If you do get it by all means let me know. But you must not be too confident, Maggie. The police think the prison dress is safe to insure his being retaken. You see he got away in broad daylight, not in the night."

"We shall see," replied the girl, with a half smile. "I'd back Rob against the police ony day."

Nor did Maggie Blackwood's confidence prove, in this case, ill-founded. Two days passed, and then she appeared at the manse, serenely triumphant.

"The card cam' this morn, sir," she said. "I've brought it for ye to see. It's Rob's ain han'."

She handed the minister a card, on which was written, "Thanks for amount of account, safely received.— J. NEILSON."

"It's rash for him to send a card in his own handwriting," Mr. Hepburn said.

Maggie laughed. "Look at the post-mark, sir."

"Glasgow! What of that?"

"Rob's nae in Glasgow, I doubt, sir; but J. Neilson is. We're beginnin' to have a notion what's up, sir. Rob's aye close when he has ony scheme in his mind, an' he ne'er telt us hoo he wad set about his escape. But he kens some Neilsons in Glasgow, an' he was awa' there for a day before he gave himsel' up. I doubt they're in it; an' Adam's awa' the noo ower the hills to Brackenlaw station to get the train for Glasgow from there an' see them. We dinna ken muckle o' them; but there's a son Adam has seen who's been awa' in Canada this four or five years, an' Adam says he is na althegither unlike Rob; that he's muckle about Rob's height, wi' dark hair an' eyes, just like eneuch that a description o' the one wad sound much like, it might be, the ither; an' Adam's taen a thocht that Rob's goin', if he's questioned onywhere, to say he's James Neilson, an' that they'll own him. We think he sent the card for them to post, meanin' we would understand to gang to them an' hear about him."

"Pray Heaven they may be able to tell you he has got safe off to New Zealand," Mr. Hepburn said.

A shadow crossed the girl's face. "Ay, sir, I hope it may be that way; but if Rob can get the hunt after him safe passed, I doubt if it will. It'll maybe help him greatly in that to get owned by the Neilsons. But I'll let ye ken what Adam hears. I doubt he'll stay ower the Sabbath in Glasgow, an' be hame on Monday."

It did not seem to James Hepburn as if he was to be

allowed to hear much of anything else save Blackwood and his escape, for the next day Sir Maurice Adair drove up to the manse in search of information.

"I can give you none," the minister said, "beyond the fact that he has escaped, and, as yet, has not been retaken."

"I was rather startled when I heard of it," Sir Maurice said. "It places me in rather an awkward position. I never thought of his escaping when I told him to come to me whenever he was a free man. It is a serious matter to aid an escaped prisoner. Yet, for the life of me, I could not make up my mind to abandon him."

"You may make your mind quite easy on the score of anything you can do for him," the minister said earnestly, "if you will only try to get him to leave the country. There is, unfortunately, not the least doubt that he still clings to his intention of taking vengeance on his supposed rival. It is quite impossible for you to denounce him; the greatest benefit you can do to the community is to aid in getting rid of him."

"Should I seek him out?"

"I think not. You are more likely to betray him by doing so than anything else. Do nothing; but if he comes to you, try to the utmost of your ability to get him to go to New Zealand. He may do very well out there."

"Do you think he is really insane?" Sir Maurice asked, a little anxiously. Under pressure of sincere regret for his own unintentional share in bringing about the disasters which had fallen so heavily on James Hepburn and Robert Blackwood, and with apparently long years between his promise of aid and any necessity for making good that promise, he had been eager in making offers, which were soothing to his own conscience, and at the same time involved no present inconvenience. Now the subject appeared in a

wholly different light ; and though he had not the smallest intention of drawing back, he felt much less enthusiastic. It must be allowed that to be pledged to find some occupation for a man possibly subject to attacks of homicidal mania, is a position calculated to make any man look grave.

Mr. Hepburn shook his head. "That is a question I dare not attempt to answer. He certainly is not insane in the ordinary sense of the word. I only wish he had been. Then he would have been guarded for life from any chance of doing further mischief. Of course I am not qualified to look at the subject from a scientific point of view ; but, as far as my experience and observation go, he seems to me to be the victim of a sort of diseased self-consciousness."

Sir Maurice looked rather puzzled. "I don't think I quite understand," he said.

"Well, I suppose it is an outrageously exaggerated growth of what is ordinarily termed touchiness ; that sort of disposition which renders people always ready to take offence about trifles. In Blackwood the tendency seems to have reached a pitch that turns a merely irritating folly into a serious danger. It so distorts his moral sense, that where he imagines himself aggrieved, no vengeance he can take seems to him unjustifiable. His own personality assumes such stupendous proportions that any rights or feelings of others are dwarfed almost out of existence. There certainly seems also to be absolute paralysis of moral sensation in some directions."

It was Sir Maurice's turn to shake his head.

"You are carrying me quite beyond my depth," he said. "But I suppose the practical outcome of all this is, that you believe he will still try to murder the man he suspects, whenever he can get a chance."

"I feel only too painfully certain of it. Therefore I say,

get him out of the country if you can. It will be the best chance for him, and also for the object of his hatred."

"I wish we knew who that is. I wonder if I could draw it out of him?"

The minister smiled. The relative weight and force of the two characters considered, there seemed to be something extremely absurd in the idea of Sir Maurice Adair practising in any way upon Robert Blackwood. "I do not think you will make much of that. My only hope is, that as the object of his suspicion is clearly some one about this neighbourhood, he may be already, to some extent, on his guard. He can hardly be ignorant of the actual occurrences that have taken place, and may chance to know a good deal more than either you or I know."

Sir Maurice went his way, and then for eight and forty hours Mr. Hepburn was allowed to forget the subject, if he could. On Monday night Adam Blackwood told him.

"Rob's had a rare stroke o' gude luck, sir," he said.

"Where is he?"

"In Wellborough hospital, wi' his face past recognisin' by ane o' corsels', I doubt. The letter cam' just as I got to the Neilsons. Here it is, sir."

The letter was from one of the hospital officials written by request of "Mr. James Neilson," to tell his father that he had reached Wellborough in safety; but had met with a severe accident just after arriving. Passing across an open space, where a sale of horses was going on, he had been kicked in the face. Fortunately it was a spent kick, and though his face was very much cut and bruised, and the doctors feared the nose was broken, they still did not anticipate any serious consequences, unless erysipelas should supervene. That might render the case critical.

The minister laid down the letter with a strong inclina-

tion to say that the stars in their courses were fighting for the escaped convict.

"It's an awfu' piece o' luck, is it no, sir?" Adam Blackwood said. "It'll keep Rob safe eneuch this some time. It's a' sae straightforward an' natural like. Mr. Neilson wrote back a gran' letter, straight awa. He said he was sair pit about to hear o' the accident to his son, an' if the doctors thocht there was the least danger, wad they telegraph at once, an' he wad come directly. Otherwise it wasna very easy for him to get awa' just then. It wad be a clever man that could recognise ony one wi' his face a' straps and bandages, an' it'll stan Rob in gude stead this some time. He'll be weel able to keep somethin' on his face for a lang while."

"Certainly the accident will greatly aid his chance of escape," the minister said, thinking the while that it would sadly facilitate also his chances of remaining in the country, if he was minded so to do. He made no remark on the subject, however. Adam Blackwood was not one of the family with whom he felt disposed to exchange any confidences.

"How on earth," he added, "can he have managed to get rid of the prison dress?"

"I canna tell ye that, sir. I'm puzzled mysel', but Rob had laid a' his plans maist carefully. He's gey close though an' he never let oot to ony o' us what he'd dune. As lang as he's in the hospital we'll hear aboot him, but I doubt we'll no hear afterwards for lang while. He'll ken there'll be a watch kept up for mony a day, an' I doubt he'll keep clear o' ony chance o' stumblin' on onybody he kens."

"Who are these Neilsons?" Mr. Hepburn asked. "Are they people in any way likely to be able to help your brother after he leaves the hospital?"

Adam Blackwood gave a rather expressive shrug of his shoulders. "I doubt ye's best speer at auld Cruickshanks

about them, sir. If Ronald and Robson was ever onybody at all, I doubt it was nearer being John Neilson than onybody else. I think he owns a boat or twa, an' maybe it wad'na just be easy to say exactly what trade they carry on. But I ken vera little about it. The sea was aye Rob's fancy far mair than mine, an' I dinna ken muckle o' his sea-goin' acquaintances. I've no mind o' ever seein' John Neilson till I went to Glasgow on Friday, but they've a tidy wee place, an' a' things nice about them; an' they were extra kind, an' seem to think a heap o' Rob. They're sair pit about at his gettin' into this trouble. John Neilson himsel' is greatly puzzled. He says he canna mak' oot——"

The man paused abruptly, with a curious look of doubt and hesitation.

"Cannot make out what?" asked Mr. Hepburn, smiling, with a shrewd suspicion of what was to come. Blackwood caught the look and laughed himself.

"Weel, sir, he canna mak' oot whatever sud hae ta'en Rob to mak' him' sae daft about a minister. He speered nae end about ye when I was in Glasgow."

"I hope you gave me a good character," the minister said, with a smile.

I could only say, sir, that Rob was'na the only one ye'd bewitched some way, an' that ye were nae like ony minister I'd ever seen. But as for why Rob sud think sae muckle o' ye I could say naethin', for it's just what I dinna understand mysel'."

"Nor I," said Mr. Hepburn.

"Weel, sir, I suppose the sun doesna atehgither understaun' why his shinin' mak's a' things glad. We're, nane o' us, o' muckle account, we Blackwoods; but I think whiles if there'd been a minister like you here when we were ladies gangin' to the Sabbath schule, we'd likely hae turned oot different. Good nicht, sir."

He disappeared with the words, leaving James Hepburn once more startled and somewhat puzzled by the results of his own doings. As regarded Robert Blackwood, the position of affairs was, on the whole, satisfactory to him so far as his own connection therewith was concerned. He seemed to be entirely relieved from all responsibility. A man more prone to let feeling be not only the source, but the guide of action, might hardly have been able to resist the impulse to try and re-establish personal relations with one who, with all his sins and short-comings, had so strong a claim on his affection, but his judgment was against any such step; so beyond committing a message to Maggie Blackwood, to be transmitted to her brother whenever an opportunity should occur, he made no effort to communicate with him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BAD SYMPTOMS.

REPORTS of the state of his self-constituted son were sent at intervals to Mr. John Neilson, and replied to by him with due manifestation of parental feeling. Erysipelas did supervene, and for a short time the case seemed likely to turn out a grave one. The final result, however, was merely to delay most conveniently the departure of the patient from the hospital, where he lay comfortably reposing behind a safe mask of bandages and strapping plaster, while every port in the United Kingdom was being carefully watched, and numberless peaceable citizens of the empire, who chanced to be young, tall, dark-complexioned, and possessed of dark eyes and hair, were subjected to much insulting espionage.

At last came a letter from the patient himself, which was duly forwarded to Mossgiel, and brought by Maggie Blackwood to the manse. It was to the effect that he was to leave the hospital in a few days; but added the important fact, that his friends must not be surprised if they did not recognise him at first. His face was still much marked, and would continue so, the doctors said, for some little time.

From that day forward all intelligence ceased. All that Robert Blackwood's friends knew, certainly, about him, was that he had not been re-captured, and that seemed to James Hepburn to imply almost certainly that he had left the country. With his speech betraying his nationality, and his somewhat marked personal appearance, it seemed hardly credible that, even supposing his face to be somewhat altered

in feature by the lucky accident which had befallen him, he should escape such observation as would lead to his identification.

It chanced, however, one day that James Hepburn, having gone on some business to the county town, met Sir Maurice Adair accidentally in the street. He noted instantly the start and slight flush with which he was recognised, as well as a momentary hesitation, which seemed to indicate that Sir Maurice would have avoided the meeting, had he not perceived that the minister had recognized him before he had himself been aware who was approaching.

"You are the last person I expected to see, Mr. Hepburn," he said, "I think you do not often stray out of your own dominions."

"I'm a dissenter, you know. I haven't any dominions."

"Well, no, not in a legal sense, but you have a sort of radius, I suppose. Any startling news stirring in Mossgiel? By-the-by, has the last political news reached you there? I mean local political news?"

"None has reached me."

"Well, it may turn out a false alarm, but we are threatened with another election. Pitcairn is likely to go to the Upper House. His father is dangerously ill. It is really appalling. When we got Pitcairn in so satisfactorily after poor Anson's death, we did not bargain for having another election so soon. The doctors think Lord Castleton may rally, but they are not very sanguine, Pitcairn will be a loss. I don't suppose he will ever be Prime Minister, but he is a shrewd, clear-headed fellow, and a useful county member. But, of course, you are a Liberal."

"I am not sure if I am actually the one or the other. But at the present moment I am more concerned with a wholly different question which I wish to put to you."

"Indeed. What is that?" said Sir Maurice, with a slightly overdone air of indifference.

"Have you ever heard anything of Robert Blackwood?"

"Well, since you ask me the question, I must admit that I have."

"Why on earth should you have any hesitation in doing so?"

"That is just what I do not know myself," he answered, laughing. "But the fact is I am acting under pressure to some extent. I have had some communication with him, but he very earnestly begged I would not mention him in any way to you, if I could possibly avoid it."

"Did he assign any reason for such a request?"

"He said he had been the cause of quite enough mischief to you, and wanted to feel sure he should cause you no more. He seemed to have the idea that your knowing anything about an escaped prisoner might be a disadvantage to you."

"You have seen him then?"

Sir Maurice hesitated. "Well, yes, I have done so. But please ask me no more questions, Mr. Hepburn. I trust I have been able to help him to a position of tolerable safety, and a certainty of supporting himself respectably. That much it is only fair to tell you, considering your interest in him. Moreover, Blackwood did ask me, at the time I saw him, should his name ever be mentioned between us, to tell you he had received your message, and was most grateful to you; and that he hoped some day he might see you again. I hope and trust he may do well. I think he is pretty safe out of the way of getting into mischief. And now," he added, looking at his watch, "I must beg you to excuse me. I have an appointment."

The minister went on his way with a sort of vague, undefined misgiving in his mind. There had been a certain

amount of embarrassment in Sir Maurice Adairs' manner, for which the circumstances of their interview seemed hardly sufficient to account. He might deem Blackwood's request extraordinary, perhaps ungracious, although the reason assigned was plausible enough. But there was certainly no need that he should be disturbed thereby.

Mr. Hepburn had been on his way to one of the banks when he met Sir Maurice Adair, and thither he now directed his steps. He was just on the point of entering, and was pausing in the doorway looking in his pocket book for some memoranda about the business he had to transact, when some one, coming rather hastily out of the bank, nearly ran against him. He looked up and found himself face to face with General Farquharson.

"Ah, Mr. Hepburn! A most unexpected and pleasant meeting. You did not know, I suppose, that we had returned from abroad."

"No. I understood that you were not expected for about a fortnight."

"Just so. We had not intended being back sooner. But this possible election has disarranged our plans. If there should be a vacancy, which is, I fear, little short of a certainty, Mr. Chamberlayne thinks of coming forward. Lord Castleton's illness has been so sudden, it has taken us quite by surprise, and has left us little time for all the arrangements which it seems certain we shall have to make. I am anxious to forward Chamberlayne's candidature as far as I possibly can, so I returned at once. He is a thoroughly good business man, and in all respects, I think, a very suitable member."

"Is Lady Ellinor, then, not with you?"

"Oh yes, she is here. We have just deposited her sister at home, and are on our way to Strathellon. Lady Ellinor

wished to see about a few little thing for the house, which she thought she could get here as well as anywhere else, so we are staying for a couple of nights at the Royal Hotel."

"I hope Lady Ellinor is well?"

"Quite well, thank you. We have had a pleasant winter at Cannes. I must allow I missed my shooting, and sighed occasionally when I thought of my hunters; still I have every reason to be pleased. I think Lady Ellinor looks better, and has really enjoyed the time there. There was a very pleasant little society there this winter; but come and see her yourself. I am just on my way back to the luncheon. Come with me. I met Sir Maurice Adair a little while since, and he promised to lunch with us. Lady Ellinor declares the very atmosphere is darkened with political small talk. She will be charmed to see you, and delighted to have a companion who can think and talk of something else."

"You are very kind, but I cannot join you to-day. I have business on hand which will fill up all my time until my train starts. I shall hope to call and see Lady Ellinor very shortly."

"Don't stand on the ceremony of calling. We are to have a dinner party immediately, political, of course. You must join us. Shall you be at home to-morrow afternoon?"

"Certainly, if you wish it."

"I will see you then in the afternoon. We shall be at Strathellon by luncheon time. I think there are some people in the town who might be useful. Chamberlayne seems to think so. I should like to consult you. I must go now. Luncheon will be waiting. Good-bye. I am sorry you cannot join us. To-morrow about four o'clock I shall hope to see you."

General Farquharson hurried away. The prospect of war, even a mere political county combat, seemed to have roused

him into unwonted sprightliness and activity, while almost with every word he had spoken the minister's heart had sunk lower and lower. § Maurice Adair's slight embarrassment seemed to be explained in about the most sinister manner possible. It was a bad symptom for the moment, a worse omen for the future. General Farquharson coming forward as a strong supporter of Mr. Chamberlayne meant, of course, much intercourse between the two houses, and that inevitably portended frequent meetings with Sir Maurice Adair; meetings which General Farquharson, looking at the subject from his point of view, would probably regard as perfectly immaterial. James Hepburn returned home with a heavier heart than he had known since the momentous evening of Robert Blackwood's appearance at the congregational meeting.

With military punctuality General Farquharson drove up to the manse door at four o'clock the next afternoon. "Heaven be praised," the minister muttered, as his quick eye caught tremulous motions of window curtains on the opposite side of the way, "that it is he, not she. They can surely not make much out of a visit from him."

There was plenty of time if they wished to do so. The visit was a long one. General Farquharson was thoroughly—James Hepburn would almost have said terribly—in earnest.

"I am determined to leave no stone unturned to bring Chamberlayne in," he said. "At the last election I had hardly been long enough here to have either the time or the acquaintance with the local circumstances necessary to enable me to take any active part in the business. It is different now. It naturally falls on me to work up this side of the county, as the other side falls to Sir Maurice Adair."

"Who will, I hope, stay there." There was something

so irritating to Mr. Hepburn in General Farquharson's unconcerned allusions to the man who was a source of such terrible peril that the words flashed out almost without any voluntary framing of them on his own part.

General Farquharson smiled. "It will be best for him, perhaps. At any rate, he will have plenty to occupy him for some time. You recall to my mind, Mr. Hepburn, our last abruptly ended conversation. I cannot tell you how often I have felt grateful to you for the hint you gave me. I have had strong reason to think, since we left Strathellon, that Sir Maurice had caused Lady Ellinor much more uneasiness than I was aware; but that she shrank from saying anything to me, from fear of conveying too strong an impression, and thus doing him an injustice. I am very conscious that I ought to have been more cautious, and am proportionally indebted to you for your plain speaking. Of course we shall see a good deal of Sir Maurice now, for a time; but I shall take good care it is only under circumstances which will, in themselves, be quite sufficient check upon any chance of Lady Ellinor being for a moment placed in the very unpleasant position of feeling herself obliged in any way to stand on her guard."

James Hepburn could have groaned aloud over this honourable obtuseness; this fatuous confidence. An almost involuntary sigh, and slight movement of impatience escaped him, General Farquharson observed, and misunderstood it.

"I must not, however, take up too much of your time," he said. "I want you to tell me about sundry residents in the town who have votes, or influence with county voters. We are to have a political dinner party to discuss arrangements. Mr. Laing mentioned one or two names to Mr. Chamberlayne. He said you held aloof from politics entirely; but I know you can give me information. And

you must come and dine with us, to keep Lady Ellinor company."

Did Lady Ellinor wish it? he wondered. He cared very little whether she did or not. It was best for her that he should be there, therefore there he would be. But as to this political discussion, why should he be selected?

"Why should you come to me about the business?" he asked. "The larger part of my congregation are Liberals of course. The Established minister would serve you better. I doubt if there is a single Conservative among us save Laing, and I do not think I know any personally in the town save Mr. Lorrimer and Mr. Campbell. Mr. Morrison will tell you far more than I can."

"Doubtless, and probably go and repeat to each individual the particular questions I have asked about him, which would all tend to show that my object was to find out where lay each man's mental corns. These sort of people are generally abominably touchy, and if I am left to flounder about among a whole lot of them without any danger signals, I may end in making them all ardent Liberals before I know where I am."

The minister gave a short laugh. "And you come to me, of all people, the very Orson of the town. I should think I never went to a gathering of half-a-dozen people that I did not trample on some one's social corns. But I think you are on pretty safe ground. Watson is a strong Liberal, so you need have nothing to do with him. As long as the Watsons and the Lorrimers are apart, there will be no very violent volcanic convulsion."

"It's too much like walking among eggs all the same. Let me take down one or two notes, and then I need not trespass longer on your good nature."

General Farquharson could not, however, even in note-

taking, shake off that military exactness and precision which Mrs. Munro had affirmed her conviction ruled even the arrangement of his night-cap. The business took a long time, and when it was concluded, under the guidance of James Hepburn's clear, sharp, incisive judgments, a perusal of the memoranda would have been a somewhat startling revelation concerning the results of different points of view, to sundry worthy inhabitants of Mossgiel.

To the minister, the apparently unimportant interview was in its suggestions painful and depressing in the extreme. It brought out in strong relief those special characteristics in General Farquharson, which were, under the circumstances, appallingly dangerous. In every department of human nature he seemed to be drilled to the highest attainable pitch of automatic precision of action; absolutely incapable of any spontaneous uncalculated movement. That fire and passion lay beneath this outward crust of immobility Mr. Hepburn felt certain; but he was equally certain that only under very exceptional circumstances would these characteristics ever show themselves. And if, even in one short interview, he felt himself irritated by this automatic precision of thought, what must be the strain of daily, hourly contact therewith, to a young, fresh, ardent nature like that of Lady Ellinor. And here was Sir Maurice Adair, always at hand, to accentuate the deficiency. In all essential qualities far inferior to General Farquharson, yet in outward seeming immeasurably his superior, because all his attractive superficial advantages had full play. It was a gloomy subject for reflection, and depressed James Hepburn more painfully than the darkest cloud hanging over his own head had been able to do.

"Please come early," Lady Ellinor had written to him the day before the gathering, "in case I should want any hint

from you," and obedience to the summons had given him abundant opportunity for making observations upon her, as she received her guests in the drawing-room before dinner. Whatever other advantages it may or may not possess, what is generally known as county society is quicker to perceive, and readier to pay respect to individual worth, than the more jealous and fussily exclusive circle of a small burgh aristocracy. It had come to be recognised in many houses, where Mr. Hepburn was not personally a visitor, that the Free Church minister in Mossgiel was to be treated and listened to with the deference due to a man of worth, ability, and scholarship. He was therefore allowed to please himself in the drawing-room at Strathellon, and not subjected to any of those worrying small attentions which might otherwise have been inflicted upon him, under the dread of his feeling himself neglected. Standing with his back against the piano, ostensibly occupied in listening, and occasionally contributing a remark to a political discussion between Sir Maurice Adair, Mr. Chamberlayne, and one or two other enthusiastic politicians, he was able to watch Lady Ellinor, in readiness to catch the least manifestation of a danger signal from her.

She was changed unquestionably, more changed during the period of her absence from Strathellon, than during any previous part of their acquaintance. The subtlest essence of her indefinable charm was gone. She was graceful, fascinating as ever, but something of the freshness was missing. Her gaiety had less of natural lightheartedness, more of excitability about it. She was not now a perfectly harmonious whole. It was not merely the growth of that something underneath, which comes gradually with the moulding and setting of character, as time passes, and gives a sense of a solid basis underlying lighter qualities ; it was a suspicion

of something underneath being different from, opposed to the superficial aspects of disposition. It was but a faintly jarring note as yet, still it marred the harmony, and was an ominous portent.

She came up to the group among which the minister was standing, at last, and said to him :

“Am I not a pattern wife, to face all this mass of masculine political ardour unassisted? I wanted to fight off, and let General Farquharson have a men’s party altogether, but he seemed to think my non-appearance might be misconstrued.”

“He is quite right there,” Mr. Hepburn replied. “It would have been a fatal mistake. It would have been all over Mossgiel to-morrow that you would not condescend to appear.”

She gave a sort of slight impatient movement. “I suppose it is well to see ourselves as others see us. But why we should be held so contemptibly mean, I do not see.”

“Because, if that sort of feeling be contemptible meanness, you are, as a body, fairly open to the charge,” he answered. “You are different, but”——

She interrupted him, laughing. “But you shall tell me the rest after dinner. I expect you to come and keep me company in the drawing-room, while the politicians fight and quarrel. See, dinner is announced.”

Then she turned to Sir Maurice Adair. “A telegram has just come. Lord Pitcairn cannot join us. Lord Castleton is not quite so well to-day.”

With, it seemed to Mr. Hepburn, a shade too much distant courtesy of manner, Sir Maurice Adair offered his arm ; but it might be only prompted by a prudent remembrance of the number of Mossgiel eyes present. As they passed down the spacious drawing-room he could not but admit they

were a perfectly matched couple. There was about him a happy blending of polished ease and manly straightforwardness, which harmonised admirably with her natural grace and refinement. More than one pair of eyes were watching them, with something of scrutiny, mingling with admiration.

The dinner passed off well. The circumstances were just those in which General Farquharson was calculated to show to the best advantage. That suppression of all individual feeling, which constitutes the perfection of military discipline, admirably fits a man for the position in which he was placed. It was his duty to keep conversation going briskly, and so he did it, undisturbed by a certain ponderousness of moral atmosphere which would have been perhaps too much for a less perfectly drilled host.

James Hepburn's whole attention was concentrated in silent vigilance. Heavy his heart might grow, but not even a losing battle would he give up until the last faint hope had absolutely perished. Sir Maurice Adair was cool enough externally, there was no fault to be found with him. Lady Ellinor was pale, but perfectly self-possessed; but there was just a hectic spot on each cheek, and a brightness about her eyes, which the minister did not like; and once, when a sudden and unexpected glance from her in his direction surprised him looking with a shade of anxious sadness at her, he saw she flushed quickly; but there was no trace of resentment in her expression.

She stayed but a few moments after the servants had disappeared, and as she passed Mr. Hepburn she said, with a smile—

“Remember that I expect you soon. It is not required of ministers that they immolate themselves on the altar of party feeling; and I have sundry questions to ask you about all sorts of things.”

The minister was not very long in obeying her summons, receiving a nod and smile from General Farquharson as he rose to leave the table, and a murmur of "happy man" from Mr. Laing. He was like most big men, a quiet mover, and the door of the ante-room closed noiselessly. He crossed the room and parted the heavy curtains which hung over the entrance to the drawing-room, without Lady Ellinor being aware of his approach. For one brief moment he paused and looked at her. She was sitting sideways on an ottoman very much as if she had dropped upon it, half unconsciously. In passing, and with her hands clasped closely together, was gazing with unseeing eyes into the fire. Her face was turned towards him as he stood between the curtains. She was pale enough then, and her brow was a little contracted, while in her eyes there was a look which he felt it hard to define. It was anxious, troubled, but it would have needed very little to make it fierce, despairing.

For only one moment did he act the innocent spy. Then he advanced into the room. She looked up, and rising with an air of relief, seated herself in an easy chair.

"How good of you to come so soon," she said, with her bright smile. "One soon tires of one's own company. How long it seems since we went away last year."

"But you have passed the year pleasantly."

"Yes. I think so. I like yachting; and it was very pleasant at Cannes. Only I was really so sorry for poor dear Stuart."

"General Farquharson does not seem to hold himself a fitting object of commiseration."

"General Farquharson, my dear Mr. Hepburn, is a man who is invariably rigidly determined to do right, regardless of all side issues. Unhappily he has conceived the idea that it is right for him to sacrifice himself to the whims and

caprices of a silly discontented woman, and he persistently sacrifices himself unrepiningly. But I know quite well that all through the winter he sighed inwardly at every glimpse of a gun, and groaned in spirit at every sight of a horse which possessed the least resemblance to a hunter. I am not so utterly selfish that the edge of my enjoyment was not dulled by my perception of the truth."

"I do not believe that it was the truth. The pleasures of sport would weigh very little with General Farquharson against the pleasure of seeing you happy."

"That is just it. Sacrifice on one side or the other. It is an unfortunate thing when the enjoyments of husband and wife happen to be at opposite ends of a see-saw, so that when one is up the other is forced to be down."

He did not reply. He did not like the tone; there was something hard, almost cynical, in it. She glanced quickly at him, and then her face suddenly grew soft and wistful.

"I am talking idle nonsense," she said, "and losing my chance of saying what I really wish to say. It has been a strange year for you, Mr. Hepburn. How much you have gone through."

"It is happily past now. It was sharp at the time."

"And mainly brought upon you by me," she said, in a low tone. "I do not care to speak on that subject; but I could not let it all pass without telling you how constantly I remember that fact with bitter self-reproach. To think that my folly should have necessitated your noble silence, and that poor fellow's noble speech."

A sob choked her utterance.

"Robert Blackwood once told me he would willingly lay down his life for you, Lady Ellinor."

"For me? Why, I never spoke to him. I hardly knew him by sight."

"He spoke truly none the less I know. He would have died for you as willingly as I would have borne a life-long stigma for your sake. Lady Ellinor Farquharson, by all that is sacred, I implore you to guard all that renders you the object of such perfectly pure, unselfish devotion."

"Oh, hush! hush! Do not speak to me in that way," she said, in an agitated tone—"at least, not now." Then she hastily rose, and walked toward the piano, saying, "I think the song is here. I will show you. I cannot think the translation even tolerable."

As she stood turning over the songs, coffee was brought in. Mr. Hepburn declined. "No, none for me, Hammond," she said, without turning round, and the servants retired.

"Forgive me," the minister said, as she returned to her seat. "I am a clumsy brute. I ought not to have risked agitating you now. But the words would come."

"No more, no more," she said hurriedly, "I am not worthy that you should give me a thought. But tell me about Blackwood. Do you know where he is, or what he is doing?"

"I do not. Sir Maurice Adair does."

"I thought as much. He tried to evade the question when I asked him, but I was sure he knew more than he would allow. Why would he not tell you?"

Mr. Hepburn told her what had passed. Lady Ellinor shook her head.

"That may be true to some extent, but I am sure it is not the whole truth. I am convinced Sir Maurice has helped Blackwood in some way which he is sure you would disapprove. Do you think he is anywhere in this neighbourhood?"

"I think not. I hope not. He will almost certainly be retaken if he is."

"Perhaps the accident has really marked his face so much that he thinks he may escape detection. At any rate, I have a strong suspicion he is somewhere not very far off. There come the ardent patriots," she added, as voices were heard in the hall. "And they might spare themselves their labours, I believe. I saw Lady Mary Stanhope yesterday. She says the doctors tell her they think it very likely Lord Castleton will linger for many months yet. She and Mr. Stanhope are going back to England at once. Well, Mr. Laing," she said, as he appeared at the moment, "have you nominated and returned Mr. Chamberlayne all in one fell swoop?"

"Oh, far more than that. We have appointed him Prime Minister, and sketched out the plan of a brand new constitution, with all the latest improvements."

The rest of the party came straggling in, and then, after a time, when a moment came in which he could speak unobserved, Mr. Hepburn said to Lady Ellinor:—

"I think I may go home, may I not? You can run alone now."

She turned a half-pleading look upon him. "No, do not go yet. You are surely not so desperately attached to early hours? Stay till the outside party are gone. Then the others will go and smoke, and you can give me the end of that interrupted social lecture. I am really curious to hear what you were going to say. There is a move now. When one goes, all the rest will soon follow."

It was even so. In another ten minutes James Hepburn was the only visitor, not staying in the house, who was left in the drawing-room.

"Now, away to your burnt offerings, all ye idolators," said Lady Ellinor. "Mr. Hepburn is going to instruct me, meantime, in the first principles of democracy."

"Under the seal of the confessional?" asked Mr. Chamberlayne, laughing. "It looks serious, General. Mr. Hepburn, you will get into trouble with your Presbytery."

"If Mr. Hepburn can make an ardent radical of Lady Ellinor Farquharson," said Sir Maurice Adair, "I suspect his Presbytery will not be very particular as to the means."

The remark was ostensibly jesting, but there was a half-suppressed insolence in his tone, very unlike the speaker's usual frank courtesy. Mr. Hepburn, looking up in some surprise, caught the expression of his face, and a perception of the purpose for which he had been detained flashed across his mind. In a few moments he was alone with Lady Ellinor.

"Now, tell me, what was the end of that sentence which dinner interrupted?" she said.

"I meant to say, that though you are personally different, your class, as a class, treat the middle classes in a way that fully justifies their regarding your advances with suspicion."

"And, as a class, what other treatment do they merit, Mr. Hepburn?" she answered. "Let them show that they respect themselves, and then we shall respect them. If you wish to see a man fawn and cringe in the most servile way before individual instances of rank and position, take the most violent intemperate radical you know. His boasted love of equality is nothing more than base mean envy of advantages he does not possess. Give him wealth and a coronet, and see how much longer his heart will bleed over his down-trodden brethren. But to take a less glaring instance. What, for example, do your Mossgiel people, who are so full of personal deference and civility to me, say of me behind my back?"

"All beautiful women have enemies, Lady Ellinor," he said, gravely. "But I have told you what one inhabitant

of Mossiel said about you, and he averred that there were many others of the same mind. I think he knew what he was saying."

"You are fencing," she said.

"I admit it. It will do you no good to reflect upon meannesses which are confined to no one class. But I think it is good for you to bear in mind that many erring sinful souls worship you as a sort of ideal of beauty, purity, and goodness, such as does not often shine across the gloom of their earthly paths. But, now, I am going. I am not needed any longer. And it will be as well."

She was sitting on a low chair, and had buried her face in her hands as he spoke. She did not move or speak as he rose. Urged by an irresistible impulse, he gently laid both hands upon the bowed head, and in a low voice, tremulous with deep feeling, murmured a blessing. Then, without a word, he left the room.

As he opened the ante-room door, a bell rang, and a distant murmur of voices became audible. Before he could close the door, Lady Ellinor came hastily through the curtains at the opposite entrance.

"They are breaking up," she said, in a voice still slightly agitated. "I am going to my dressing-room." Good night, my best, my truest friend."

She hastily pressed his hand, and passed on across the hall. As the minister was putting on his coat, he witnessed simultaneously the last sweep of Lady Ellinor's train at the turn of the staircase, and the appearance of Sir Maurice Adair at the entrance of the passage leading to the smoking-room.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A RESOLUTION.

THE summer advanced ; but although it was observed that Mr. Hepburn went often to Strathellon, the voice of alarmed morality was but sparingly lifted up in Mossgiel. Scandal about James Hepburn had not been altogether successful, and was connected in a great many minds with irritating remembrances. It seemed disposed where he was concerned, to decline being gently led in the paths of pleasurable excitement, and to be inclined instead to career madly away with head-strong determination, dragging those who would fain have guided it, with much damage and loss of dignity by the way, into thorny and perilous places. Under these circumstances, the duty of abstention from evil speaking is apt to assume larger dimensions and more definiteness of outline than are generally allowed to it.

From these visits the minister gained little beyond a steadily-increasing conviction that a crisis could not be very far distant. What were the exact grounds of that conviction he would have been puzzled to say ; but none the less, there it was. Sir Maurice Adair was sometimes at Strathellon, but not very often, and quite as frequently when Mr. Hepburn was there by invitation as when he arrived unexpectedly. Nor could anyone have taken exception to his manner towards Lady Ellinor Farquharson. This fact was, in truth, one of the many small items which went to make up the sum of the minister's anxiety. Sir Maurice was too

gravely and courteously respectful ; there was none of his old frank, light-hearted manifestation of all-absorbing devotion. A man does not carelessly give the rein, even for a moment, to a fiery steed on the watch for a chance to break away from him. That was Mr. Hepburn's reading of the change in this respect.

Lady Ellinor, too, was changed—changed and changing—above all in her manner to himself. He had not lost one particle of her regard, he was very certain on that point ; but she always kept on the surface of things, never giving him a chance to introduce any save the most ordinary topics of conversation. No pleading, warning words, such as he had spoken on the night of the political dinner party, would have been possible, without his forcing them in with ill-judged abruptness. She was always pleasant, cordial, and friendly, but ever more and more, notwithstanding, compelling him to stand aloof, as far as all confidential intercourse went.

But the change which seemed to him the most ominous of all was in General Farquharson himself. He certainly grew graver and more silent—sometimes even a trifle absent in manner ; and Mr. Hepburn thought he could detect a slight alteration in his demeanor to Lady Ellinor. There was the old gentle, slightly formal courtesy, but just tinged with a something bordering on a faint shade of resentment.

All these symptoms the minister observed, and he thought that he observed also a gradual increase in them. It must be allowed that all through the summer the sheep of his own especial fold had a much smaller share of his thoughts bestowed upon them than these outsiders, with whom he had no special concern. These sheep were also watching what went on at Strathellon, and making their own comments.

“Lady Ellinor Farquharson seems to have grown much

more cautious and discreet," Mrs. Haigg affirmed. "We do not see the sort of things we used to see."

"Well, I am sure she has had a lesson," replied Mrs. Watson, who since Mr. Lorrimer had dined at Strathellon, and Mr. Watson had not, seemed rather more disposed to be severe on Lady Ellinor. "It is a good thing if she has the sense to profit by it."

"How? What lesson?" demanded several voices. Had some grave scandal escaped their notice?

"Oh, I don't mean personally. But she has had a good warning, in the fate of her favourite Mr. Hepburn, of the disastrous consequences which may follow upon slight indiscretion."

"Perhaps she has had a more stringent warning than that," put in Miss Muir. "That her conduct now is much more suitable to her circumstances and position, I do not suppose anyone will dispute. But as to why it is so, that is quite another thing. It is very well to talk about her having her own way; but for my part, I should say General Farquharson is not a man to be trifled with beyond a certain point. She may have had a sharper lesson than we think. They went away very suddenly last year."

"Yes, I think you are very likely in the right," said Mrs. Campbell. "I don't suppose he cares enough about her to mind what she does, so long as she does not do anything actually discreditable. But when it comes to such a question as that, I should think he would be as hard as iron."

"Dear me," exclaimed Mrs. Lorrimer, who rather enjoyed exploding small shells, "what shall we do for scandal if Lady Ellinor Farquharson turns sober and serious? Mr. Hepburn is quite played out. Mrs. Campbell, you or Mrs. Wylie, being the youngest wives among us, must really do something awful, or we shall have nothing to talk about."

"Perhaps you elder wives might get your husbands to do something awful," replied Mrs. Campbell, sharply. "That might do as well."

"If you promise to elope with Mr. Lorrimer, my dear, I'll throw all my influence into the scale."

Mrs. Campbell gave her head an angry toss, and some one else changed the subject.

And at that very moment, while Lady Ellinor Farquharson was being commended by the virtuous matrons of Moss-giel among the tea cups in Mrs. Campbell's drawing-room, she and Sir Maurice Adair were standing together almost on the very spot where, more than a year previously, James Hepburn had intercepted her perilous course; and Sir Maurice was talking in low earnest tones, while Lady Ellinor listened in evident agitation. And when they shortly after parted, he pressed a passionate kiss upon the hand she gave him.

A few weeks later, Mr. Laing came strolling in one evening to the manse, and after some desultory remarks, he said--

"What is up at Strathellon, Hepburn?"

The question was a startling one, but the minister answered composedly enough.

"Nothing that I know of. Why?"

"You are not well posted up in intelligence, then. The place is to let for a term of years."

"Strathellon let? What nonsense are you talking, Laing?"

"No nonsense at all. I heard it yesterday from Mr. Chamberlayne, to whom it has come round in rather a curious way through a London agent. Chamberlayne is greatly taken aback, and asked me if you knew anything about it. He said he should say nothing about it in the county, until he heard something more."

"I do not believe it."

"I think there is something in it. How long is it since you have been there?"

"About ten days."

"I shall not be surprised if you hear about it the next time you are there. Chamberlayne hopes it is true."

"Why?"

"Well, he is a good-hearted man, and he is very anxious about her. He says it is as clear as daylight that Adair has fairly lost his head. The whole county knows that, with the one exception, I suppose, of General Farquharson; but they all give her credit, as yet, for holding her own gallantly. Still, it is dangerous work. He must be a terribly attractive figure against the background of that formal old disciplinarian.

The minister gave a deep sigh. "Yes," he said, "it is not a desirable state of affairs. I think Mr. Chamberlayne is quite right. If General Farquharson is meditating some change which will give her more society and occupation, I shall be very glad to hear he thinks of leaving Strathellon."

It was not very long ere more certain information reached Mr. Hepburn. A pastoral visit to one of the retainer's cottages, took him into the Strathellon grounds, and as he was returning by a path through the woods, he came suddenly upon General Farquharson himself, sitting on a rustic bench, commanding a fine view over the surrounding country. He seemed to be deep in thought, and there was a sort of stern sadness on his face, which was certainly somewhat aged and worn. He turned at the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Ah, Mr. Hepburn," he said, "taking a stroll this fine afternoon?"

"And trespassing horribly? No, I have been visiting the wife of one of your gardeners."

"Mrs. Fraser? Ah, I heard she was ill. I hope she is better."

General Farquharson spoke in an absent tone, as though he was paying very little heed to his own words, and without waiting for any answer he added—

"Are you in a hurry?"

"Not at all."

"Then sit down. I should like to talk to you."

James Hepburn obeyed, but for a few moments General Farquharson said nothing. Leaning forward, with his elbows resting on his knees, he seemed absorbed in tracing patterns on the path with the end of the walking-stick he carried. At length he said—

"I have come to a rather momentous resolution since I have seen you, Mr. Hepburn. None other than to leave Strathellon entirely, and to let the place."

"I suppose I can divine your reason," the minister said.

"Yes, I think so. But I confess it is a leap in the dark. To try to do the best I can, with no light to guide me, is unfortunately my doom now. Of course, I have come to this decision solely on Lady Ellinor's account."

"And I am sure you have done wisely."

"I trust it may be so. It is a step I cannot take without the deepest regret, and it has cost me much anxious thought. I have always held very decided opinions about non-resident landed proprietors. I only hope it may not prove that I have made what is really a great sacrifice on my part in vain. But, unfortunately, I am not in my wife's confidence."

"Do not allow that feeling to gain possession of you, General Farquharson."

"I have, unfortunately, no alternative. It is forced upon

me. Do not for a moment think I feel any resentment. It causes me pain, I admit, and bitter disappointment, to find that, in spite of all my efforts, I have, in some way, failed to make Lady Ellinor happy. God knows I have had no other thought since our marriage, and I have not the least idea how I have failed. I can only lay it to incompatibility of age. Do not think that I blame her. She possesses, I think, every quality which can make a woman charming and lovable, and I am beginning to reproach myself bitterly for having so ill-judgingly bound her by a tie, which it is impossible to undo, to an uncongenial life. I fear my admiration for her when we first met blinded me to the truth in a way fatal to her happiness."

James Hepburn was gnawing his lip for very pain.

"Have you told her what you feel and urged her to confide in you?"

"Lately, I have. The thought suddenly occurred to me that she might possibly be distressing herself with the idea that I might be disappointed at her having no family. The truth being that nothing would cause me more anxiety than any such prospect. Lady Ellinor was prematurely confined within a year after our marriage, and was so alarmingly ill, that the repetition of anything of the sort would be almost insupportable to me. She was very much agitated when I spoke to her, assured me that no such fear had ever crossed her mind, and only implored me not to trouble myself about her. I begged her to give me her full confidence, and let me have the chance of doing anything which would make her happier; but she denied, as she always does, that I could do anything more than I am doing; and accused herself, as she has done before, of being a capricious, discontented woman, spoilt by over-much indulgence. The fact of her accusing herself of such defects is the very thing which

makes me feel I have not her confidence. It is such an absurd charge, in her case, that I know there must be something behind, which she does not choose to confide to me. It pains me much to think so, but I will not press her further."

"Does she know of your determination?"

"Yes; I told her. But she expressed no opinion. I observed that she turned very white, but she only said she was quite ready to do as I wished. That was not, as you may imagine, a very satisfactory way of putting it, when I am acting against my own decided wishes, in hopes of benefit to her; but, of course, I said nothing."

"I am certain you have decided wisely," said the minister.

"I am glad to hear you say so. I had had a thought in my mind——" He paused for a moment, and then continued, "Mr. Hepburn, if anyone could aid me in this matter it would be yourself. I will not pretend that it is pleasant to me, as a husband, to invite any man to come between my wife and myself; but I hope I should never let any personal feeling interfere, for a moment, with any chance of promoting Lady Ellinor's happiness. Will you talk to her, and see if you can learn anything which might guide me? I can face the thought better in your case, than that of any other man on earth."

"No, most emphatically, I will do nothing of the kind."

Most sharp and decisive was the tone. Then he added, more calmly, "Forgive me for speaking so vehemently, General Farquharson, and believe me I am deeply sensible of the noble confidence you repose in me. But such interference can never be good. The relationship of husband and wife is too sacred for any such interposition. None the less have I, for long, watched Lady Ellinor closely, and carefully weighed those unguarded expressions which often drop in

the course of friendly intercourse ; and without a moment's doubt I say you are doing well and wisely. Remove Lady Ellinor to scenes where she will have more society, more variety, and be not weary in well-doing. It may be the disparity in years is telling heavily just now ; but middle life comes earlier to women than to men. Every year, now, will virtually lessen that difference, and if you have only patience to persevere, you may chance to reap a very rich reward. Perfect harmony may in time grow up between you, and then, rest assured, Lady Ellinor will never forget the chivalrous forbearance of your conduct to her now. But, above all things, keep her entirely away from here."

General Farquharson rose with certainly a brightened countenance. "You greatly cheer and encourage me, Mr. Hepburn. These are subjects on which it is so rare that one can speak to anyone, and it is very true that outsiders often see most of the game. Come down to the house and dine with us this evening. That, at least, is a pleasure which neither Lady Ellinor nor myself will willingly forego until the last moment."

Somewhat reluctantly Mr. Hepburn acquiesced, and they walked slowly on together towards the house. "Have you fixed the time for your departure yet?" the minister asked.

"Not absolutely. It must depend on circumstances. I am anxious to secure a really good tenant. If I cannot live here myself, the best thing I can do is to leave a good tenant in possession so that as little loss as possible may result to the neighbourhood. I hope I may accomplish that object shortly. Then we purpose paying a few visits, after which I think we shall perhaps go to Italy for the winter. All that is, however, rather in the clouds at present."

"Is Lady Ellinor in?" General Farquharson asked, as they entered the house.

"Her ladyship came in about half-an-hour since, sir. She desired me to say you would find tea in her boudoir."

"Whither I will venture to take you, Mr. Hepburn," General Farquharson said; and together they ascended the broad staircase.

"Are you there, Ellinor?" he said, as they entered the empty room. "I have brought Mr. Hepburn. He will dine with us."

"I am coming," she replied, from beyond a doorway hung with heavy curtains; and in another moment she appeared from between them, wearing a simple tea gown, and with her lovely hair drawn off her face, tied back with a piece of velvet, and streaming loose behind.

"I am not an escaped Bedlamite, Mr. Hepburn," she said; "but Alison has been performing some mystic rite upon my hair, and I am ordered to let it hang loose until I dress for dinner."

She greeted him cordially, and then turned to the tea table, and began to pour out tea. It was an inexpressibly lovely picture; the pale, certainly, but still beautiful face; the perfect figure, set off by the graceful folds of the simple dress; and the masses of waving hair, streaming down far below her waist. The minister involuntarily glanced at General Farquharson, and could have groaned. His eyes were fixed upon his wife. If he would but let the feelings which inspired the passionate admiration, the wistful sadness of that look, have free play, he might defy a dozen Sir Maurice Adairs.

"I have been telling Mr. Hepburn our plans," he said, as she turned towards him, offering him a cup of tea.

A faint flush rose to her face. "I hope you have secured clerical approval," she said quietly.

"Yes, indeed, Lady Ellinor," the minister said. "Sorry

as I shall be for some reasons, I think General Farquharson is acting very wisely."

She made no immediate reply. Then, after a moment's silence, she asked him how he had found Mrs. Fraser that afternoon?

It was not until he went to the drawing-room before dinner, and found her there alone that she spoke again on the subject. She was standing at a small table, arranging some wild flowers in a vase, when he joined her.

"So you are very glad to get rid of a black sheep," she said.

"I never said so."

"No, you only implied it."

"I simply said the determination was a wise one, Lady Ellinor."

A strange look passed over her face. Then she said slowly,

"Yes—I think it is that—in any case."

"You will not regret leaving Strathellon?"

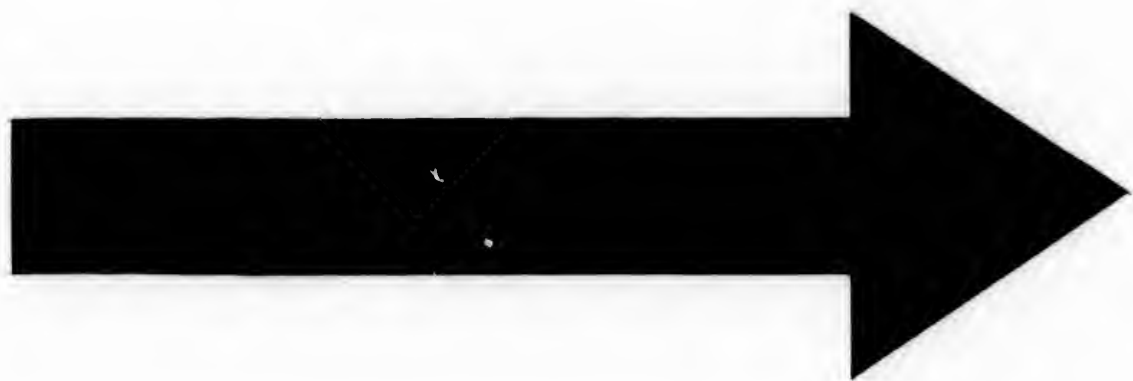
"I? Oh no. I shall be glad. I daresay I shall never see it again."

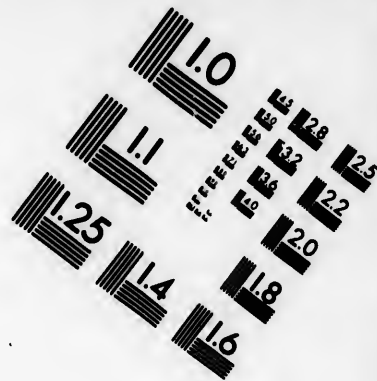
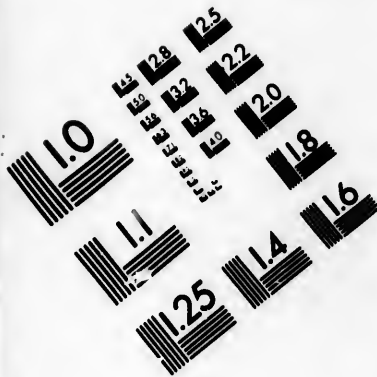
"On the contrary, I look forward, confidently, to your return in time to lead a very happy life here."

"No. Fate will be kinder to my husband, I hope, and relieve him of an incubus. Then he will return some day, and be very happy, with a really good wife."

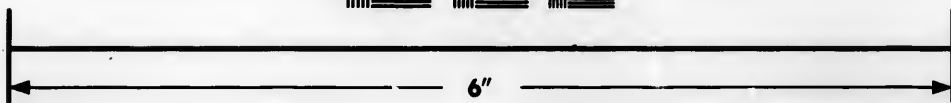
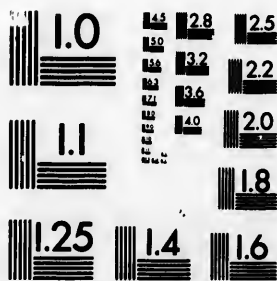
She spoke with the utmost tranquility; but General Farquharson's entrance at the moment prevented any reply.

She did not again directly allude to their intended departure, but the minister watched her narrowly, and was a little puzzled. There was a strange sort of calmness about her. The old playful gaiety, the later touch of excitability, had alike given place to a kind of stillness. Surely, he





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thought, it was a hopeful sign. Did it not portend that in General Farquharson's resolution she had found a peaceful solution of her difficulties? A speedy end to feverish struggles, rapid alternation of excitement, self-reproach, and depression? A cutting of a gordian knot, the untying of which had been too much for her unaided strength?

However that might be, he felt convinced the one step was taken which afforded the best chance of saving her. Once removed from her present peril, and he honestly hoped the future he had sketched for General Farquharson might be realized. As he walked home that night, his heart was lighter than it had been for a considerable time.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE BEGINNING OF A MOMENTOUS DAY.

IT very soon got wind in Mossiel that the establishment at Strathellon was to be broken up, and the place let for a term of years. What an extraordinary freak! Mossiel said. If General Farquharson had taken such a step two years earlier, when Lady Ellinor was making herself so undesirably conspicuous, there would have been some sense in it. But to stay on when it would have been so much better to go, and to go when all reason against staying was taken away, seemed to be a most unaccountable manifestation of mere caprice on the part of such a self-controlled man as General Farquharson had the credit of being.

Of any definite arrangements Mr. Hepburn heard nothing. He chanced one day to meet General Farquharson on horseback, and could not but perceive that the stern sadness on his face had deepened in intensity, as he stopped to speak to him.

"I had thought by this time to be able to tell you that all arrangements were definitely concluded," General Farquharson said; "but I have been disappointed. What I hoped would prove a very successful negotiation has broken down, and for the present I am quite at sea again."

"I am sorry to hear that. If you are to go, I think the sooner the better."

"I shall not let any such obstacles detain us long," he answered. "If I do not succeed in making satisfactory arrangements in the course of a few weeks, I shall leave the place, and trust to settling something afterwards."

It was about a week after this meeting that one evening the latest post brought James Hepburn a letter in a totally unknown hand. It bore no address, but was dated that morning, and carried the post-mark of the county town. It began abruptly—

“Lady Ellinor Farquharson has promised to run away with Sir Maurice Adair. They are off to-morrow. She will go out early on some pretext. A hired carriage will meet her at Braefoot Bridge, and take her to Kelvin Station. She will join Sir Maurice there, and go on by the one o'clock train. The carriage is to meet her at twelve o'clock.”

There was no signature. Nothing which could afford the faintest clue to the authorship of the letter. The dead calmness of intense excitement settled down upon the minister. He looked at his watch. He had been out during the evening, and had found the letter on his return. It was already past nine o'clock. On the strength of an anonymous communication, which might prove a hoax, he dared not take other than very cautious action. Whatever his own feelings and opinions might be, as a matter of fact, if the assertion were without foundation, action grounded on the letter would involve a great insult to Lady Ellinor Farquharson. Whatever course he took, it must be one useful if required, harmless if he was being deceived for any purpose. This necessity precluded all thought of going to Strathellon at once, the idea which had first occurred to him. How was he to account to either General or Lady Ellinor Farquharson for an unexpected appearance towards eleven o'clock at night?

Then, with the letter in his hand, he took to calculations. Braefoot Bridge was some seven miles distant from Mossiel, about two miles and a half from Strathellon. The drive from thence to Kelvin, a very quiet station, was about seven

miles. Lady Ellinor was a good walker, and would naturally avoid having to linger about. If it was really true that she meditated this terrible step, she would not be likely to leave Strathellon before eleven o'clock at the earliest. It would take him less than two hours to reach Braefoot Bridge himself. By soon after ten o'clock he would be there, and walk from thence to Strathellon by the road which she must follow. If she started earlier than he expected, he could not fail to meet her; and he would more probably reach Strathellon before she set out. Supposing he then found he had been the victim of a hoax, he could easily find an excuse for the visit, and no harm would be done.

He was curiously cool and collected. It was almost a relief to him to feel that the period of anxious suspense and uncertainty had come to an end—that the time for vigorous action was come. Had he had time to analyse his own sensations, he might have learned by that very sense of relief how certain had been his inward conviction that the hour for action would come sooner or later. It did strike him as curious, even then, how little he seemed to regard the catastrophe as a final one; how almost instinctively he was treating it as the remediable end of a bad business, rather than as the irremediable beginning of a much worse one.

He was early astir the next morning, and was on the road soon after eight o'clock. Fortunately it was no unusual thing for him to be early abroad; so the fact was not likely to attract any special observation. It was just ten o'clock when he reached Braefoot Bridge, and turned along the lonely country road, running mostly through woods, in the direction of Strathellon. He had not now the faintest doubt that he must either intercept Lady Ellinor, or find her still at Strathellon. Without a rough

scramble through the woods, which she would certainly not face on such an occasion as the present, it was impossible for her to reach the bridge save along the road he was following. He had ample time to walk leisurely, and meditate on the next step in the drama should he find her still at home. That was a point less easily decided, in that it must depend on circumstances he could not foresee, especially on the sort of reception he encountered.

He turned in at the lodge gates without having seen a single soul, and walked leisurely up towards the house, mindful to avoid the least appearance of any unusual haste. Near the house there grew, close by the drive, a thick shrubbery of evergreens, through which ran a path leading to the servants' department. As Mr. Hepburn came up, a figure, standing a few feet off, on this pathway, caught his eye. A second glance showed it to be Lady Ellinor's faithful maid, Alison, with a pale, tear-stained face, and every mark about her of deep distress. She beckoned the minister towards her.

With a dread foreboding of impending evil, he obeyed her summons.

"What is the matter, Mrs. Alison?" he asked.

"Oh, Mr. Hepburn, my dear lady! I fear all is over!"

"All over? What do you mean?"

"I fear she's away, sir, and will never come back."

Could this be the writer of the letter? The thought instantly flashed through his mind. But the next words dispelled it.

"I saw you coming up the road, so I made bold to stop you. I was just thinking whether I would start for the manse."

"But what has happened?"

"My lady is gone out, sir, and I doubt she'll never come back."

"Gone? Where?"

"I don't know, sir."

"But in which direction?"

"Away through the wood, sir. By the path which leads to the footbridge over the river."

In exactly the opposite direction to that from which he had come.

"How long has she been gone?"

"Near on an hour, sir. She went out just as the clocks were striking ten."

A host of possibilities flashed through his mind, but it was no time to consider them. The one terrible fact clear was, that pursuit was useless. Whether he had been wilfully or accidentally deceived, that much was certain. She had nearly an hour's start, and he had no certainty, beyond the first half mile, in what direction she might have gone. The best thing he could do was to try and gain information. More by impulse than for any distinct reason, he determined to give no hint of the warning he had received.

"But is that such an extraordinary thing as to lead you to such a suspicion?" he asked.

"Oh no, sir! My lady is very independent. She often goes out alone on foot. It isn't that. Everything is so strange now. Things have been going very wrong, sir."

"So I feared." Then he put the question boldly, "Do you think she has gone with Sir Maurice Adair?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

"Has he been here much?"

"No, sir; but I am sure they have been meeting. My poor, dear lady, she has been very unhappy I know, and I know she has fought hard against doing wrong; but I have felt sure for some time how it would end. She was a changed woman from the day the General spoke about

going away from here. She grew so still and quiet, and was always so pale, and she seemed to take no interest in anything, and a sort of despairing look in her eyes sometimes. All yesterday she seemed so strange, I really thought some illness was coming. She quite frightened me once or twice. When she went to bed, she told me she was going out early, and that I should bring her breakfast to her dressing-room. When I had done her hair she said I need not stay, she was not going to bed just yet. She was up and in her dressing-room when I went to her in the morning, and she put on a plain walking dress, pretending to eat some breakfast; but it was nothing she took, and I could see her hands were trembling all the time. As soon as she was ready she took up a hand-bag, which I saw was standing on the table, and went towards the door. Then she hesitated, and asked in a sort of half-choked voice if General Farquharson was gone down stairs yet? I said he was still in his dressing-room. 'Oh, very well,' she said, 'it does not matter. Tell him when he goes down stairs, I am gone to meet Mrs. Tweedie. I am going to lunch with her.' 'Is the carriage to call for you, my lady?' I said, as my mind misgave me. 'The carriage,' she repeated, in a sort of bewildered tone. Then she gave a little start, and said, 'Oh no, Mrs. Tweedie will drive me home in her pony carriage.' Then she went out, hastily, without saying anything more, and I watched her path. Then I began to put the room to rights. I didn't like what I saw. Several little things had been put away, and her dressing-case was locked—a thing I never remember. In the boudoir, too, things were different. Several of her writing-table drawers were locked. Things weren't left as they generally were."

"Did you tell General Farquharson?"

"Yes, sir; and I thought he seemed surprised. But you

know he never shows anything. He only asked if I was quite sure my lady did not want the carriage sent for her in the afternoon. But, oh, Mr. Hepburn, I'm sure she isn't gone to Mrs. Tweedie's. I'm sorely afraid she is away to Sir Maurice."

Poor Alison's hardly restrained tears broke out afresh, and there was little the minister could say to comfort her. The confirmation in his possession of her worst suspicions he was determined to suppress to the very last.

"I fear you have grounds for uneasiness," he said. "But I do not at present see what can be done."

"Well, sir, if I might make so bold, would you go and see if she is really with Mrs. Tweedie? If she isn't, it would be a great thing if it could be broken gently to the poor General. It will be a fearful blow to him. I've come to see, of late, he thought more of her than I fancied. I think he'd take it best from you."

He shrank inexpressibly from the thought of undertaking any such task. A feeling of positive guilt was creeping over him. In the light of the terrible certainty that the dreaded catastrophe had actually come to pass, he was inclined to question if his own conduct had not been inexcusable. Why had he not spoken more openly and distinctly to the unsuspecting husband? Now that the fatal climax was reached, it was very hard to grasp the fact that but twenty-four hours earlier the bare suggestion of it, as a remote possibility, would have seemed a gross insult. Of any personal shrinking, however, he was little likely to take account.

"Yes, I will do that," he said. "I will go to Mrs. Tweedie about luncheon time. I shall then easily find out the truth. If our fears are justified I will return at once. Has anyone in the house, besides yourself, any suspicion?"

"Not the least, I think, sir. I doubt if any of the others even know she is gone out."

"That is well, Go and bathe your face, and try and look as unconcerned as you can."

With that they parted. And so it was over. Love had not saved. No, it was not over. For him it was only beginning, and love should save yet. He almost set his teeth upon that ; with that sort of energy of determination which, in a strong nature, is roused by desperate circumstances, which paralyze or bewilder the weak. He was an independent man and alone in the world. Many things were possible to him, which would not be possible to most men. Had he not accepted the commission of watching over Lady Ellinor Farquharson, when Mrs. Munro had so solemnly urged it upon him ? Had that commission been to watch over her when she was comparatively safe, and throw up the task when the need was sorest ? His whole spirit seemed to rise to meet the necessity, now it was something tangible which could be grappled.

Outside the lodge gates he paused to consider. It was only half-past eleven. Two o'clock, the luncheon hour, would be the time for him to seek Mrs. Tweedie. She might chance to be out at the moment, a contingency which would leave him still in doubt, for that instinctive desire to keep everything quiet until the last moment was too strong upon him to let him hazard the most trifling question on the subject of his search. He did not feel inclined to return to Mossiel, and chafe in forced inactivity for nigh on two hours. He owed a visit to a member of the congregation, living in rather an out-of-the-way spot. He had just about time to pay the promised visit, and reach Mossiel by two o'clock. He made his way across country to his destination, anxiously pondering the while over the problem of that curiously graphic, and yet misleading letter, whose author-

ship was such an insoluble mystery, paid his visit without any manifestation of pre-occupation, and started for home along a farm road, which opened upon the main road about two miles from Mossiel. He had to cross a bridge over the railroad, on his way, and had reached the centre of it, when he chanced to glance over the parapet to the line below. He stopped dead, uttered a suppressed exclamation, and stood for a moment, gazing horror stricken at the object which had caught his eye.

A short distance beyond the bridge the railway crossed one of these deep narrow glens, down which, so often in Scotland, mountain burns find their way to the larger streams. Embankments thrown out on each side met a bridge over the deepest part of the glen. This bridge had been formerly of wood, but lately an iron one had been substituted, and some of the old timbers were still lying beside the line. Just where the embankment nearest to where Mr. Hepburn was standing began, a rough fragment of rock cropped up suddenly from the ground; close beside it was a telegraph post, With diabolical malice a long piece of a disused beam had been fitted in between the rock and the post, its end projecting to about the centre of the nearest line—the line along which, even now, the train that Lady Elinor Farquharson was to have met at Kelvin station, was rapidly approaching. A slight curve would prevent the obstacle being seen by the driver until the train was close upon it. The timber could not yield, and it would catch only one wheel of the engine. There was not the faintest room for hope that the train would not be thrown off the line, and hurled down into the glen below. Kelvin, its next stopping place, was full nine months off. Even allowing for a slight slackening of speed, to pass the curve and bridge, the train would be running at a considerable pace.

James Hepburn looked at his watch. He almost thought he already heard the distant beat of the engine. In another moment he had crossed the bridge, vaulted over the railing, dashed down the embankment, and was hurrying towards the heavy timber. But what could he do? He did hear the train. Could he stop it? Not in time, with that curve interposing. Could he remove the obstacle? He could not turn it aside. Unaided he could not raise it over the projecting rock. One, and one only chance there was. Its further end projected considerably over the embankment. Standing, himself, full in the track of the coming train, he might perhaps be able to push it back, until it overbalanced, and rearing up, slide down the embankment. It was the only chance, and his muscular strength was great. In another moment he was between the rails, plying his utmost strength upon the heavy timber. He felt it yield, but it gave only inch by inch to his desperate efforts, and every moment the thunder of the approaching train was sounding louder and louder in his ears. Right in its course he was standing, but he never even remembered that. He remembered only the train rushing on with its living freight, and that terrible rocky glen below. The beam moved with every desperate effort. It was beginning to quiver. Another tremendous heave or two, and it would overbalance. Round the curve come the thundering train; the quick, short, shrieking whistle struck on his ears. The beam was overbalancing now. Surely it was just clear. The end at which he was working slowly reared up, so that he had no further power over it. The engine was almost upon him. With a desperate spring he cleared the line. The edge of the swaying beam caught the engine just above the buffers. The timber snapped off against the rock like a twig. The fragment struck the minister with fearful force, hurling him down the embankment, and he knew no more.

When consciousness began to come back to him, it was with a confused perception of voices, which seemed to be speaking a long way off. He lay in a half stupor for a moment, then he opened his eyes. He was lying at the foot of the embankment on a couch formed of railway carriage cushions, and was covered with rugs; and could it be?—yes, it was—the pale anxious face bending over him was that of Lady Ellinor Farquharson. Some one kneeling on the other side had a finger on his pulse.

“Drink a little of this,” said Lady Ellinor, quietly, and she held a cup to his lips. He drank a few mouthfuls, and looked to the other side.

“I am a doctor,” said the stranger at once, “one of a great many people who owe their lives to you. The engine was a good deal damaged, but the driver said he thought he could safely run on to the next siding, and wait there: so it was judged best to clear the line. This lady told us who you were, and volunteered to remain. Messengers have gone to Mossgiel. Help will shortly arrive.”

The clear, concise explanation brought every thing back to him, and for a few moments he lay perfectly still; but the strong power of such a nature over the body was exerting its empire remorselessly, and he was thinking clearly and rapidly. All the more clearly and rapidly, for that he was conscious his power to think at all would not last long. He opened his eyes again, and looked at the doctor.

“You can easily reach the burn,” he said. “Please bring me a little water.”

The doctor took the cup of the flask, and began to make his way down to the water. Then he turned to Lady Ellinor

“You were going then?”

“Yes.” The answer was almost inaudible.

“Where is Sir Maurice?”

"Gone on with the train. It cannot get beyond Braefoot siding. We thought it best to part now."

"Best! Yes, salvation," and a heavenly smile for a moment flitted over his features, already drawn and lined with pain.

"Now you are mine," he continued. "I have bought you—with my life, I think. Go back at once to Strathellon. Tell your husband all—everything—all you have felt in the past; and tell him, from me—my dying wish perhaps—to be a better husband than he has been in the past."

"Oh, I cannot—I cannot," she sobbed.

"Yes, you can, and you will. You will not rob me of the reward which will make death sweet to me, for which I would have sacrificed a thousand lives. I think I am dying. Let my last memory of earth be your promise to go and learn how much your husband loves you. Tell him I said that. My head is failing. Let me hear you promise."

"I promise."

"Then go at once. Let me see you start, while I can see anything.

"And leave you?"

"Yes, go. You can do nothing. Tell him you have undertaken an important commission for me. You can do nothing here. Help will soon come. Go and be a true and loving wife to the man whose deep love for you you will learn when you tell him all."

Reluctantly Lady Ellinor obeyed. He followed her with his eyes, saw her meet and speak a few words to the doctor, then turn and climb the embankment to the bridge, and disappear in the direction of Strathellon. Again that smile passed over his face, and with a faint murmur, "Love has saved," he closed his eyes, and lay motionless, and again unconscious.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE END OF A MOMENTOUS DAY.

TOWARDS three o'clock in the afternoon General Farquharson was seated alone in the library at Strathellon. He had declined all luncheon, beyond a cup of coffee and a biscuit, and was deep in letters and papers of all sorts, with a vague sense of depression and uneasiness weighing upon him. The receipt of Lady Ellinor's message in the morning had both surprised and pained him; it seemed to emphasize the fact that their relations were not what they had been—that a sort of intangible shadow was coming between them. There was nothing remarkable in her action, only in the method in which it had been made known to him. In time past she would have come herself to his dressing-room and told him not only where she was going, but what she was going to do. General Farquharson's chivalrous courtesy would never have allowed him to interfere with her in any way; but there had always been affectionate confidence between them about all their doings.

He was busy writing when the door opened. His back was turned towards it, and, thinking it only a servant, he did not turn round. The door softly closed again, and there was a dead silence. General Farquharson glanced over his shoulder, then sprang up from his seat with a smothered exclamation. Was it his wife? that pale, haggard, worn-looking woman standing rigidly just within the door, gazing at him with such despairing eyes; or was it a spectre come to warn him of some impending catastrophe?

“Ellinor! my darling! what is it?”

Never had she heard a tone of such passionate tenderness in his voice. Was she to learn his love too late? He advanced hastily towards her; but she put forward her hands as if to repel him.

"Do not touch me, Stuart," she said, and her voice was dull and toneless. "I am come because I promised. I promised Mr. Hepburn, and I must not break my word. Perhaps he is dead already."

"Hepburn dead! Ellinor!" and he paused and looked keenly at her. Was it illness? some fever affecting her brain?

She walked forward and stood on the hearth rug, her eyes fixed on the flowery plants arranged in the grate.

"Yes," she said, "it may be; he is fearfully injured. He made me promise to tell you all. You must listen, Stuart; I must not break my promise."

"Sit down, my darling," he said.

"Don't call me that," she said, sharply. "No, I would rather stand. I don't feel so suffocated. I was running away, Stuart, with Sir Maurice Adair. We were in the train. Some one put something in the way. Mr. Hepburn contrived to move it; but he is fearfully injured. He made me promise to come and tell you all; and he said I was to say you were to be a better husband than you had been. I don't know what he meant, but he told me to say it; and he said I should learn, when I told you all, how much you loved me. He said I was to tell you he said that."

General Farquharson was standing close to her. His face had turned a sort of ashy grey colour, and seemed to wither up at her words; but he made no movement. He only said, quietly—

"Do as you promised, Ellinor. Tell me everything that you think Mr. Hepburn wished you should tell me."

Then he heard the whole sad story, so utterly unsuspected by him, of his own wife's married life. No thought of self-extenuation was in her mind. She merely told of her disappointment, her youthful longing for a more ardent love, her growing impatience under his unvarying but formal affectionate attention, because it was the truth—a part of that *all* she had pledged herself to tell him. She told of her long, long struggle against Sir Maurice Adair's growing influence over her; of his increasing infatuation; and of the honest belief of both, that his own sentiments towards her were merely those of a mild affection which would not so keenly feel her leaving him, but that the passing pain would be more than repaid in the future by the chance thus afforded to him of making a more congenial marriage. Then she told him how, at last, when she and Sir Maurice found that total separation was impending over them—the last fatal resolution had been taken. She told it all with a sort of cold, apathetic calmness—too stunned by the shock she had received, and by hopeless despair for the future, to feel anything keenly for the moment. She only held steadily, in a dull mechanical way, to the fulfilment of the promise she had made—a promise, perhaps even already to the dead, that she would tell her husband everything.

General Farquharson stood listening intently in unbroken silence to the strange sad story, revealing how utterly, notwithstanding all the close intimacy of wedded life, he and his beautiful wife had been hitherto strangers to each other. For it told him not alone how wholly he had failed to read her inner nature, but how wholly she had failed to read his. Never probably did any man listen to a confession with a stronger feeling that every sentence was a damning accusation against himself. How utterly—how hopelessly he had failed to supply the needs of the bright, ardent young life he

had taken into his own keeping! He had started with a theory, and that theory he had persistently endeavoured to carry out. When it had not accomplished all he desired, he had still bored steadily on, charging himself with not putting it sufficiently in practice, never thinking to ask himself whether the failure portended something wrong in the theory. Blind fool that he had been, never to have seen the truth, which, now that it was laid bare before him, seemed as though it must have been self-evident all along! Once and again he quivered all over for a moment, and the veins on his temples stood out rigid and cord-like; but he neither changed his position nor uttered a word until Lady Ellinor ceased speaking. Then, after a brief silence, he said—

“What became of Sir Maurice Adair?”

“He went on in the train. We thought it best to part. I do not think he understands that all is over. Now, you must settle everything, Stuart. I will go anywhere you like—do anything you like. Only, for your own sake, for my young sisters' sake, let a separation be arranged with as little scandal as possible. Perhaps it would have been better for you if I had got clear away. Then you might have got a divorce, and married a better wife. Now you cannot get free, I fear.”

He did not instantly reply. She never once looked at him. She took off her hat, as if its weight oppressed her, and, throwing it down on a chair, leaned her arm on the mantelpiece, and, resting her forehead against it, gazed still fixedly down upon the glowing blossoms before her. Suddenly she felt her husband's arm passed around her, while the other hand gently drew her head on to his breast.

“Must we part, Ellinor?” he said, in a low tone of the deepest tenderness. Can you not forgive me?”

She tried to start away, but he held her firmly. Only

she drew back her head, and gazed up in his face with a strange, bewildered, startled look. A faint smile came up upon his pale face.

“You shall not escape me while these arms have strength to hold you. My poor darling! To think I could be so mad, so blind! Oh, Ellinor, Ellinor, how all too thoroughly I have deceived you! Child, do you think all the fire and passion of a man's nature dies out before he is fifty years old? I could have kissed the very ground you had trodden on, sometimes; but I have held it all down with rigid determination. I dreaded that you would regard any manifestations of love-like devotion as absurd in a man of my age; would feel yourself made ridiculous by them. To be always quietly attentive and affectionate, to gratify all your wishes, and leave you absolute mistress of all your actions, has been the aim and object of my life. And thus I have wrecked your happiness! lost my own! and almost——”

A heavy sob choked his utterance, and a violent burst of hysterical weeping on his wife's part finished the sentence. There was no courteous solicitude now. He held her in a close embrace, and pressed many a fervent kiss upon the dishevelled golden brown head. But for a brief space he let her sob undisturbed. Then he spoke, firmly but tenderly.

“All is well between us now, my darling. You understand, and I understand. Thank God that is all that is necessary. Not a word more, now, about the subject. We shall have all our future life in which to wonder over it; shall we not, dearest? You must, for a short time, put a great force on yourself, Ellinor. We hardly know, yet, how we stand. Not a suspicion must fall on you. Tell me, darling, does anyone know or suspect what was in prospect?”

“No one. But I think Alison was anxious. She looked so strangely at me this morning.”

"Very well. There is fortunately, or unfortunately, only too good cause for your looking pale and terribly shaken. Sit down in that arm-chair, and try to be fairly composed. Leave the rest to me. It was to Dr. Tweedie the messengers were sent, was it not?"

"Yes."

"That is most fortunate." And with the words he rang the bell. "Send Mrs. Alison here," he said.

Alison shortly appeared, and General Farquharson, watching her closely, noted the slight start, and look of untold relief as her eyes fell on her lady. He spoke in his gravest manner.

"Lady Ellinor has brought dreadful intelligence, Alison," he said. "There has been an accident on the railway. Mr. Hepburn is seriously, perhaps fatally, injured. A message came for Dr. Tweedie to go at once. Lady Ellinor has walked home, and has had no luncheon. Go at once and bring something to her boudoir. She is quite faint and exhausted. She will lie down and rest for an hour, and then drive with me into Mossiel, to learn more particulars. I will go upstairs with her."

Alison obeyed. "You must nerve yourself for the effort, Ellinor," he said. "I cannot afford to be indulgent to-day. It is impossible to say what rumours may have got about. Nothing could so possibly refute them as our going into Mossiel together this afternoon. Now come away upstairs, and rest for an hour."

He was not markedly affectionate in manner then. It would have been almost more than she could have borne. But the quiet firmness with which he sustained and encouraged her, was a wholly different thing from his old formal courtesy. He insisted on her taking some nourishment, and then, sitting quietly beside the sofa, held her hand in his

firm, strong grasp, soothing and calming her by the mere force of his own powerful will.

About half-past five that afternoon all Mossiel was edified by the sight of General Farquharson driving Lady Ellinor in her pony carriage up to the manse gate. All the town was evidently astir. Groups of people were standing about the streets, and there was many a face not less pale and sad than Lady Ellinor's own.

Before the groom had time to ring, a bystander came forward.

"They have taken him to Dr. Tweedie's, sir," he said.

General Farquharson had no heart himself, and too much thought for Lady Ellinor, to ask any questions. They drove on to Dr. Tweedie's house. Mrs. Tweedie herself came to the door, and signed to them to come in.

"You have heard, then," she said, as she led the way to the drawing-room.

Before Lady Ellinor had a chance to answer, General Farquharson struck in

"Yes. Did you not know that Lady Ellinor was there? She went out early, and was just at the spot when the accident happened. She only left Mr. Hepburn in order to bear a message about which he was anxious."

"Oh, was that it? The doctor who stayed with him said there had been a lady there who knew Mr. Hepburn. But he thought she was in the train."

"Naturally. But what of Hepburn?"

Mrs. Tweedie shook her head, and had to struggle a moment for composure to speak.

"He is fearfully injured. The left arm and shoulder got the full force of the blow. But some ribs are broken also, and Dr. Tweedie fears there are internal injuries, how serious it is hardly possible to tell yet. Ah! here he comes."

Dr. Tweedie entered at the moment. "He heard the carriage draw up," he said, "and asked if it was you? He insists on seeing you for a moment before you leave."

"Is it a hopeless case?" General Farquharson asked.

"No, I cannot say that. It is impossible to foretell. All I can say is that if any man could pull through, he is the man, with his pluck and splendid physique. But the injuries are terrible. We have telegraphed for Professor Forrester, and the company are sending Dr. Stone. But neither can arrive until the last train to-night. Hewson and Cumming are here now. Cumming is a first-rate surgeon. I believe we have done everything that can possibly be done."

"Does he suffer much?"

"Terribly at first, but we have contrived to soothe that, somewhat, and he made light of it all along. I never saw such pluck. Now he is lying perfectly quiet, and he looks as if he was meditating perpetually over something which affords him the deepest satisfaction."

A half sob from Lady Ellinor interrupted him.

"It has been too much for you," Mrs. Tweedie said. "Lady Ellinor was there," she added, turning to her husband; "not in the train, as that doctor thought. She was passing at that moment."

"You must not let him see the least trace of agitation," Dr. Tweedie said. "I am almost doubtful about his seeing anyone, as the utmost quiet is most important. But he insisted so strongly, when I hesitated, I did not think it wise to cross him."

"You are quite right," said General Farquharson. "I will answer for Lady Ellinor's composure, and for Hepburn being the better for seeing us. The message Lady Ellinor undertook to bring me, from him, was of the greatest

importance. I shall be able, in a single sentence, to set his mind at rest upon a matter which has been causing him grave anxiety."

Dr. Tweedie led the way to the room where the injured man was lying. The great grey eyes, looking unnaturally large and bright, were turned towards the door as they entered, and closely scanned the two faces. Then that faint smile, which seemed like a ray of the bliss from a far off world of perfect peace and happiness, stole over his face again.

White as a piece of marble, and trembling in every limb, but perfectly composed, Lady Ellinor walked up to the bedside, and taking in both of hers, the hand he feebly raised, bent down and whispered—"I did your bidding, and gave your message."

He gently pressed her hand, and turned a questioning look on General Farquharson.

"There was urgent need for your warning," he said, firmly. "You have averted untold suffering, and everything now is entirely as you would most earnestly wish. But I trust it is no dying message, and that you will yet live to rejoice in what you have done. We must not linger. Perfect quiet is necessary for you, and entire composure is very difficult for Ellinor's shaken nerves."

He released her hand, and held his out to General Farquharson, in whose strong clasp it lay nerveless. His lips moved, and General Farquharson, bending down, caught the whisper—"Nunc Dimittis"—as the heavy eyelids dropped, and he lay white and still. The doctors who had been standing a little apart came hastily forward. "It is nothing," Dr. Tweedie said, as he felt the pulse, "but I think he has had enough."

"I shall be back to-night, to hear your report, after the

other doctors have been," General Farquharson said, as they left the house. Then he added to Lady Ellinor, as he took the reins, "We must go as far as the post office. Then you need not be harrassed no longer."

They drove up to the door, and the groom was in the act of posting the letters, when suddenly out of the shop came Sir Maurice Adair. He was on the pavement before he saw with whom he had come in contact.

Had the shock been less startling, it might have been more serious. Lady Ellinor Farquharson was petrified. She could only sit mute and rigid, not even acknowledging Sir Maurice Adair's presence by the faintest salutation. A quick spasm passed over General Farquharson's face, but his perfect condition of drill came to his aid. He betrayed no other symptom of emotion. Sir Maurice was fairly self-possessed. He was startled, but the fact of General Farquharson and Lady Ellinor being together, prevented him from supposing he had had any need for special caution.

General Farquharson spoke first. "You have heard the terrible news, I suppose," he said.

"I have indeed. I am awfully grieved. I came here on purpose to hear more. Is the case hopeless?"

"I trust not. I cannot bear to think it; but the injuries are very severe."

"I was thinking of going to the house. But, perhaps, I had better not."

"On the contrary, I think you should go. Such marks of wide-spread interest cannot but be gratifying to Mr. Hepburn. Are you returning to Dunkerran to-night?"

"Yes. By the last train."

"Then send your dog-cart to meet me at the station, to-morrow, will you? The two fifteen train. I want to have

a little discussion with you over business of some importance."

"Certainly. Will you sleep at Dunkerran, to-morrow night?"

"Thank you, no. I will trouble you to send me back to the station to meet the next back train. Good afternoon."

He turned the ponies' head as he spoke, well satisfied to perceive that sundry loungers had heard the appointment made.

Lady Ellinor did not speak during the homeward drive. She lay back in the carriage in a sort of dull stupor, the exhaustion resulting from the intense strain and shock of the last ten hours. She was vaguely amazed and bewildered by her husband's words to Sir Maurice Adair; but it was only a dull, confused sense of something incredible. Her mental prostration was too great to let her clearly and fully grasp the meaning of what had passed.

"You are quite worn out, my love," he said, with a touch of his old formal manner, as he helped her out of the carriage, with butler and footman standing by. "Will you let me carry you upstairs?"

"Oh dear, no," she said, making an effort to rally. "It has given me a dreadful shock; but I am not quite so bad as that. Your arm will be enough."

Leaning on her husband's arm she passed slowly up the staircase, while an eager knot of servants, clustering round the door, sought information from the groom.

"You will not come downstairs again to-night, my darling," he said. "We will have dinner brought up to your boudoir. Then you can rest quietly, while I go back to Mossgiel. Child, how ill you look!"

She raised her beautiful eyes to his face, with a wonderful depth of expression in them. "It will not be for long,

Stuart," she said. "I am having abundance of the only medicine that could do me any good. It will not be long before you will see the effect."

Something of the effect was already visible when General Farquharson returned, after about two hours' absence. Many thoughts had passed through her mind, as she lay quietly reposing on her sofa—thoughts of sorrow and sadness, of humiliation and bitter self-reproach. But nothing could entirely neutralize the effect of the joyous consciousness that, for the first time since her marriage, she was listening for her husband's returning step, with the feeling that his presence meant for her a perfect happiness which was wanting in his absence.

He brought on the whole a better report than they had dared to hope for. The injuries were very serious, and for some time at least, the results must be doubtful. In many cases, the doctors said, they could hardly have dared, where the injuries were what they were, to express any hope. But with such a constitution, and such mental fortitude and self-control, it was difficult to say what might not be possible.

"Dr. Tweedie said our visit did him good," General Farquharson said, "that he certainly revived after it."

"Yes," she said in a low, almost solemn tone. "Mad, wicked, I have been, but I cannot be altogether bad, or he would not have cared so much for me. But, oh, Stuart."

"What, dearest? No more discussions to-night, remember."

"No. But one thing. What did you mean about going to Dunkerran?"

"I will tell you when I come back."

"But you do not mean to—to—"

"I do not mean to do anything that will cause you the

least trouble or distress. But I will not have you talk any more now about the subject."

"There is one thing I want to tell you, Stuart. I have remembered it, oh, how thankfully, lying here alone. I hardly know why it was, a sort of presentiment, I suppose; but I could never tolerate the slightest familiarity. I was hardly conscious that I was holding him aloof, but I suppose I must have been. He never ventured to do more than kiss my hand."

General Farquharson bent down and kissed her fervently. Then he said gravely,

"From my very soul, Ellinor, I believe, had we been parted, he would have made you a kind and devoted husband, and been unfailing in his efforts to promote your happiness. Did I not honestly believe that, I do not think I could dare to see him."

She threw her arms round his neck. "I think I hate him," she exclaimed. "He is not worthy to be named in the same breath with you."

"You may forgive him now, dearest. It was a frightfully narrow escape, but perhaps nothing else could have availed. We might have gone on to the bitter end, with a great gulf between us. The men who ordinarily make havoc of domestic happiness would never win the slightest influence over you, and you would probably never have come again across a man of Adair's character and disposition. I could almost believe that it is because he is worthy of something better, that his effort to do evil has been turned to good. He and Hepburn between them have been our salvation. Now I am going to ring for Alison, and you must go to bed."

Thus that fateful day came to a close, and it seemed to Lady Ellinor Farquharson as if years, rather than twenty-

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four hours, had passed since she had been occupied in making her hasty, secret preparations to abandon for ever her home, her good name, and that husband, the depth of whose love she had so narrowly missed learning, as James Hepburn had warned her she might do, amidst the keen anguish of a life-long remorse:

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CHAPTER XXXI.

A STRANGE CONFERENCE.

SIR MAURICE ADAIR was very far from being a sufficiently hardened sinner to be able to expect with complete indifference a friendly visit from the man he had striven, and still purposed, to injure cruelly, albeit not the faintest suspicion had crossed his mind of the real course of events. General Farquharson's face had been stern and set, and his manner more than commonly rigid, when they had met in Mossgiel. But that, under all circumstances of the case, had not surprised him. It seemed so natural a consequence of the shock of such an unexpected and terrible accident to a valued friend.

When, therefore, General Farquharson was announced, he advanced to meet him with a cordiality which was merely slightly tinged with nervousness. General Farquharson's manner was sternly grave, but it was not unfriendly. He did not, however, take the hand Sir Maurice offered, and that significant action warned the younger man quite sufficiently of danger ahead, although it did not entirely prepare him for General Farquharson's first words.

"How have I merited, Sir Maurice Adair, that you should try to do me the cruellest injury one man can do another?"

A quick spasm passed over Sir Maurice's face, and the rejected hand, which had dropped on the table, beside which he was standing, trembled visibly. He did not answer for a moment. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, he burst out vehemently—

"I never thought of you at all. I simply saw the loveliest, the most adorable woman God ever created treated with something little above coldness; her loving nature chilled, and her whole life rendered unhappy. I bore it as long as I could, and then I asked her to accept, in place of such treatment, the deepest, most impassioned love man ever offered to woman."

"And with it a stained name, expulsion from her rightful place in society, and a future life always to some extent under a cloud."

"No. She would have borne my name, and the world is wide. One narrow set is not mankind. Devoted love and the society of a circle of true-hearted friends would have awaited her, and made up to her for what she had lost. I never for a moment did you such an injustice, General Farquharson, as to dream of your being one of those base wretches who would prevent the woman, whose love they had forfeited, from ever again bearing the name of wife. I knew that I should be able to give her my name, and devote my life to promoting her happiness. I do not seek to extenuate my action as far as it concerns yourself. I have no excuse to offer. I simply tell you the honest truth. I could no longer endure to see that she was not happy, and I honestly believed my love would make her happy. You know the rest."

He spoke with an air of straightforward, manly sincerity, which was strongly in his favour. But he did not lift his downcast eyes, or he might have seen that the grave, steady searching look which was fixed upon him was by no means an unkindly one.

"I fully believe you would have unceasingly striven to do all you say," General Farquharson replied. Did I not do so, I could not have dared to face an interview. But the

attempt must have been a failure. You have been deceiving yourself, and in your calmer reflection you will admit that. You know the world, Sir Maurice Adair, and you know, though you may try to shut your eyes to the fact, that, at least for a woman belonging to the class in which Lady Ellinor has been born and brought up, the step to which you were urging her is one fraught with life long consequences of sorrow and bitterness. It is when I think of all these consequences, I feel as if I could never bring myself to forgive you."

"No husband could ever be expected to do that." Then, in a lower tone, he added, "She was very unhappy."

"With no unhappiness to excuse your action. I am no stern, austere moralist. Some might hold me dangerously lax. But I do not hesitate to say I have known cases in which I should have held your action justifiable; but this is not one of them."

"It seemed to me to be so."

"Yes, because you wished to find it so. In all honesty, however, I can say I hold you less to blame than myself. The temptation against which I believe you honestly strove, and your power to injure me—all result from my own blind infatuated folly. I hold myself so deeply guilty that I feel as though I had forfeited all right to condemn you. Enough of that, however. It is not for you to know what has passed between Lady Ellinor and myself. It is sufficient to say that what you *have* done enables me to think very lightly of what you *tried* to do. You, with the aid of that noble fellow now lying a shattered wreck, have insured Lady Elinor's happiness in a way you very little dreamed of. It is that fact which enables me to forgive you for your attempt to bring upon me such a bitter, life-long sorrow."

Sir Maurice Adair suddenly raised his eyes, and looked

General Farquharson full in the face. "Would it have been that?" he asked.

"Do you doubt it?"

"Honestly, yes, I have done so."

General Farquharson did not reply for a moment. Then in a slightly tremulous tone, he replied—"I know no way in which I can more fully show that my forgiveness of your conduct is absolute, than in saying what I can say in all sincerity. May heaven grant you may never know so cruel, so heart-breaking a grief, as that you have tried to draw down upon my head."

Sir Maurice was much agitated. "Believe me, General Farquharson," he said, "I did not credit that. I may have wilfully tried to blind myself. I fear it is only too probable. But I did really believe, or had persuaded myself that I did believe, the pain you would suffer would be neither very lasting nor very severe; that you had not found happiness yourself in your marriage; and that though a certain amount of pain and distress must result to you, it would not be greater than you would find consolation for in some more congenial tie, which you would be able to form. Had I realized the truth, I think I could have fought more steadfastly against temptation."

General Farquharson laid his hand upon the younger man's shoulder. "That I fully believe. But as long as you live, Adair, never allow yourself to assume again that an undemonstrative manner necessarily implies a deficiency of feeling."

"Thank you," was Sir Maurice Adair's somewhat irrelevant reply.

"For what?"

"For calling me 'Adair.' In showing me what you are, you have made me feel what I am, or rather have been.

When you thus address me, it gives me a hope you will let me, some day, try to show you what I feel towards you."

General Farquharson smiled gravely. "An overruling Providence," he said, "has averted an awful catastrophe, and has rendered it not impossible for you and me to be, in time, firm and true friends. I am come to-day to give you, I think, the strongest proof I could give you of undestroyed regard, and full forgiveness. I wish to consult you over our immediate course of action."

"You have but to lay your commands on me."

"Well, for the present moment, I think it would be painful and embarrassing for Lady Ellinor to meet you. At the same time, I am very averse, as things have turned out, to leave Strathellon. It would be a great grief to both Lady Ellinor and myself to do so as long as Mr. Hepburn is in his present condition. If you can arrange to leave the neighbourhood entirely for a time, I shall feel you have done all you can to atone for the past. Of course, a total cessation of intercourse, while you remained at Dunkerran, would give rise to much comment, which I am anxious to avoid. And for the present that is necessary."

"I will leave to-morrow, and remain away for years, if you wish it."

"That will not be necessary. If you can settle to be absent for six or eight months, it will be quite sufficient."

"And when I return?"

Again, a smile crossed General Farquharson's face. "When you return," he said, "you have my free leave to try and persuade Lady Ellinor to elope with you, as often as you find a chance to do so."

"Might I see her, just once for a moment, in your presence, before I leave?"

"No. As far as I am concerned you might see her when

and where and how you pleased. But she is fearfully shaken. I was quite grieved, this morning, to see how painfully nervous and excitable she seemed to be. Under these circumstances I cannot sanction an interview, which, if she would accord it, which I doubt, could not fail to agitate her. I can see that it will be necessary for me, for some time to come, to guard her from all excitement most carefully. I will be the bearer of any message. I would rather you would not write to her."

"Only ask her, then, to forgive me; and assure her I will try to be worthy of the friendship which I hope she will one day accord to me."

"I will tell her, and now good-bye. When we next meet, I think it will be as friends whom nothing can ever come between."

"Good-bye. I do not ask for a forgiveness, of which you have so nobly, so generously given me, already, full proof. But this much I will say. Had I succeeded in carrying out my design, and come afterwards to know what you really are, General Farquharson, a life-long remorse would have been my fate. Let me give you, in turn, one parting admonition. Show yourself in your true character in future, and the man does not live who could draw any woman, worth loving, from your side."

Then, with a cordial, hearty grasp of hands they parted, and General Farquharson was soon on his road home again.

Lady Ellinor, flushed and excited, met her husband at the head of the stairs, when he returned to Strathellon. "Oh, Stuart, I am so glad you are come," she said. "I was getting so nervous; I dreaded a quarrel, or something."

"Silly child. Come and sit down quietly, and I will tell you all. We parted firm friends."

Seated beside her, with her hand clasped in his, General Farquharson told her all that had passed, even to the parting admonition he had received.

"Did he say that?" she exclaimed. "Oh, then I can forgive him. Write and tell him so, Stuart. Tell him I shall remember him only as the man who taught me to know my husband. Oh, Stuart, how can I ever atone, ever requite you?"

He passed his arm round her. "Love me, Ellinor," was all he said, as he pressed his lips to hers.

It was not, after all, to be *Nunc Dimittis* for James Hepburn. It was a long sore struggle, with many alternations of hope and fear; but at length the period of steady, though slow improvement set in. And then, in due time, came the advance of sitting up for a few hours every day in, Mr. Laing averred, a Mohammedan paradise, of every possible thing which could delight the senses.

He was sitting thus alone one evening, as the autumn dusk was falling, when a servant, bringing in the lamp, said that a groom from Dunkerran had arrived with a message, and wanted to know if he could see Mr. Hepburn.

"Yes, let him come in," he said, anticipating some communication from Sir Maurice Adair. The servant left the room, and in a few moments ushered in the messenger; a tall, young fellow, in a groom's undress clothes. As he came, rather slowly, forward into the lamp light, Mr. Hepburn looked at him in some perplexity. The face seemed in some way familiar to him, and yet he could not recall when and where he had seen it.

"I doubted ye wadna ken me, sir," the visitor quietly observed.

"Robert Blackwood!" exclaimed the minister, even now

barely able to connect the face with the familiar voice. The change was not alone such a one as might be due to the effects of the accident. The face was worn, and lined with lines which only mental suffering could have printed on it.

"Yes, sir," he said, quietly. "It's no true I've a message, but I did'na weel ken hoo I wad get to see ye ony ither gait wi'out gi'en my name, an' I daurna do that."

"It is surely madness for you to be here."

"Wad ony one ken me, sir? Forbye that, it's darkenin' fast. But I wad ha'e riskit a' things to see ye just aince mair, and ask ye to forgie me, before I gang awa' for ever."

"Forgive you, my lad? For what?"

"For that ye're lying there, wasted an' worn wi' pain an' weariness. It was I that did that piece o' deil's wark."

James Hepburn was, for a moment, too much startled and amazed to reply "You, Blackwood!" he said, at length.

"Ay, sir. It was just me."

"What devil has taken possession of you?"

"A deil that was minded I wad ken the torments o' the damned before I left this warld, I think. I dinna think I hae sleppit twa hours thegither ony night since I heard what had happened. I wad hae blawn my ain brains oot, but for the hope I aye had that ye might get ower it, so that I wad hae a chance to tell ye ye'd gained yer will, wi' anither besides Lady Ellinor, an' ask ye to forgie me."

"You bewilder me, Blackwood. I feel as if I could not grasp your meaning. You must try and make it all clear to me. Sit down."

"That's just what I wad fain do, sir. I want to tell you noo, a' ye've sae long wanted to ken. I doubt ye'se best let me just begin at the beginnin', an' tell it a' to ye my ain gait."

"Yes, do so. That will be best."

"Weel, sir, the man I've aye been after is just Sir Maurice Adair himself."

"Then you are entirely wrong, Blackwood. Sir Maurice never injured you. I put the question to him, myself, whether he had ever done anything which might have fairly aroused your suspicions, and I do not feel the least doubt that he was speaking the truth when he absolutely denied it."

Blackwood shook his head. "Ye'll ne'er convince me, sir, but that he cam' between Mary an' me; but it's nae matter the noo. To get on wi' my story. It was him I was waitin' for that night when I sae near shot you. I'd seen him drivin' in to the gates, an' I thocht he'd likely be stayin' to his dinner. I went up to the stables aboot eight o'clock, on a pretence to speak to ane o' the grooms, an' saw his horse was there; so then I went and waited. I knew he'd no servant, sae when ye cam' oot o' the lodge gate, I'd ne'er thocht o' it bein' onybody but him; an' I scarce lookit at the trap, or for a' the darkness I think I might ha'e seen I was wrang. Then ye ken hoo I wad fain ha'e finished him up in the wood; an' when he cam' to see me, an' seemed sae much taen up aboot my gi'ein' mysel' up, an' sae anxious to help me, I just thocht I'd get anither chance, some day. Then when I got awa', an' got that smash in the face, it a' seemed as it wad help me. I got that kick tryin' to keep oot of range o' the police. I chanced upon that horse fair, an' thocht they'd likely be hangin' aboot, sae I was slippin' alang amang the horses. I thocht then it was a gran' chance, an' I believe I'd hae been caught, but for it; for there was a gey sharp look oot keppit, I'll tell ye. When I got better, I went an' saw Sir Maurice, an' he was a' for me to gang oot o' the country, but I tauld him I'd nae do that;

an' that I'd no' be that easy recognised noo, as it wad be ony great danger. I saw he didna like it, but I doubt he didna just like to shy oot what was in his mind. Then, after thinking a bit, he asked me was I onyway weel kent about his place. I tauld him I didna ken a saul aboot that side o' the country, and then he said, wad I tak' a groom's place; he wanted a fresh han' aboot the stables, an' he wad easily avoid sendin' me onywhere in danger. I thocht I had him then, sure enuch, an' I took the place. I watched him close, but I didna see muckle chance just then. Wi' the election business, he was aye flyin' aboot the country, but I soon made oot he was gettin' a hold on Leddy Ellinor, an' it grieved me sair for her. I had nae thocht what was up till a week beföre the time. Then I followed him one afternoon when he went oot alane. He'd a gait o' crossin' the hills on foot, an' meetin' her in the woods, an' then walkin' roun' the back way to Mossgiel Station, an' gettin' back wi the train. He met her that day, an' I got close, an' I heard it a' settled; an' hoo the trap wad meet her, an' tak' her on to Kelvin station; an' hoo he wad drive awa' up to Castlemuir station, an' come doon wi' the train that wad pick her up. Just then they heard ane o' the keeper's callin' to a dog in the distance, an' they parted in haste, an' I had nae chance to do for him. I thocht I'd pit a stap on that game, or I wad hae sent ye word sooner. But I never got a chance. An' when I found a' things were bein' settled for his bein' awa' a lang, lang while, an' that I wadna get anither chance, it drove me fair mad. I got that letter awa' to ye early that mornin'; an' a' that day he was busy wi the steward, and then early next mornin' he was awa'. Hoo they'd come to mak' a change I dinna ken, or hoo Leddy Ellinor got to Castlemuir station; but they'd altered it some way. After he was gane, I scarce ken what I did. Then the diel pit the

thocht in me o' wreckin' the train. One day, after I followed him, I'd gane back that road, an' I'd seen that beam lyin' up against the rock just by the telegraph pole; an' I saw in a minute it wad be no a hard or lang bit o' wark to heave it roon' sae as it wad fa' down between the rock an' the pole, an' stick oot ower the rail. I made straucht awa' ower the hills, an' had it fixed in nae time. A' the rest ye ken, sir. But ye'll never ken what I felt when I heard what had happened, an' knew that Leddy Ellinor must have been in the train forbye, and that ye were the only one hurt. Do ye mind what ye said, sir, the nicht I gave mysel' up? That if I tried it a third time, yer life wad maybe pay for't, an' hoo ye thoct I'd hae a sair heart then. A sair heart's nae the word ava; it's a heart-break. An' ye said, lang syne, sir, if I'd shot ye, an' the horror o't had turned me frae evil, ye'd hae been weel content. Ye've dune it wi' less than yer life, sir."

"Do you mean that you have given up all thought of vengeance, then?"

"Ay, that I have, sir. What wad ye hae me do, after a' I've brocht on ye, but to try to lead a' the rest o' my life, as like as I can, to what ye wad fain hae it to be. I doubt it'll no be a lang life the noo, sir. The blow that didna kill you 'll kill me. I canna get ower it. Day an' nicht, day an' nicht, the thoct o' my pittin that cursed thing, just to strike down an' injure for life the only bein' in the warld I've ony great care aboot, keeps burn, burnin' in my brain. But I'm aff to New Zealand directly. I've only been waitin' just till I could see ye, an' tell ye a', an ask ye to forgie me. Ye'll do that before I go, sir, I ken; an' sae lang as I live, gude or bad, nae human bein' shall be the worse for me, if I can help it."

James Hepburn silently grasped his hand. For a few

moments he could not speak. Blackwood's words were simple enough; it was his tone and manner which gave them force, betraying how keen and deep his suffering was.

"My poor boy," he said at last, "what I have suffered is nothing to what you have suffered; but had it been ten times as severe, I would have held it a light thing for all that it has brought about. The promise you have just made me has lifted a weight which has lain heavy on my heart ever since that night you so nearly shot me. I have always felt, since then, that if you ever succeeded in reeking your vengeance I should be to some extent responsible. Thank God that I alone have suffered from your attempt; and that its result has been to bring about all that I have prayed, night and day, it might be given me to bring about."

"I kent ye wad look at it that way, sir. I doubt ye haven't got the power to think aboot yersel' ava. Ye'd be weel pleased wi' ony trouble to yersel' sae lang as it brought ony gude to ither folk. It's gude o' ye to speak so, and it'll be a comfort to me to remember yer words when the sea's between us. But naethin's ony power to help me muckle the noo. I canna see richtly hoo things might hae been, for the horror o' what is. Gude-bye noo, sir. I'll be awa' in a week's time. Will ye write a line whiles, just to cheer me on?"

"Right gladly. Write to me the inoment you land. Good-bye, my boy, and the blessing of God go with you."

Blackwood held his hand for a moment, gazing into his face with an expression of unutterable sadness. Then he moved away, and slowly left the room.

ONLY LOVE CAN SAVE.

LOVE had saved—how many, none would ever know. Within a year, Lady Ellinor Farquharson, more radiantly lovely than ever, in her exceeding happiness, looked in one morning at the manse.

"I have news for you," she said.

"Good, I see."

"Yes. Sir Maurice Adair is coming home, and is to be married, in three months time, to my sister Agnes."

Robert Blackwood had not predicted falsely. He died within a few years after his arrival in New Zealand, leaving behind him the reputation of being the kindest-hearted, most unselfish man in his neighbourhood. He had arrived from Scotland, his friends said, with a deep sadness upon him, which had not decreased as time passed, but had rather seemed to develop into a settled melancholy. An attack of low fever carried him off.

James Hepburn never entirely recovered from the injuries he had received. He lived a gaunt, haggard wreck of his former self, never very strong, and often suffering severely. But of that no one ever heard. Mr. Laing's prophecy had come true. He held a position in Mossgiel which no minister had ever held there before—a position which even the noblest spirit can only reach through a baptism of fire. But it was not in the abundant fruit of his labours, always before him in Mossgiel, that he found the deepest source of his constant rejoicing. It was in the thought of the silent sleeper, in that far-off grave, who had left behind him, in his new home, a memory of kindly deeds, and unfailing sym-

pathy, and in constant contemplation of the happy homes at Strathellon and Dunkerran. In both, children were growing up, and the two beautiful sisters were said to be the best and happiest wives and mothers in the county.

[THE END.]

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children were
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the county.

